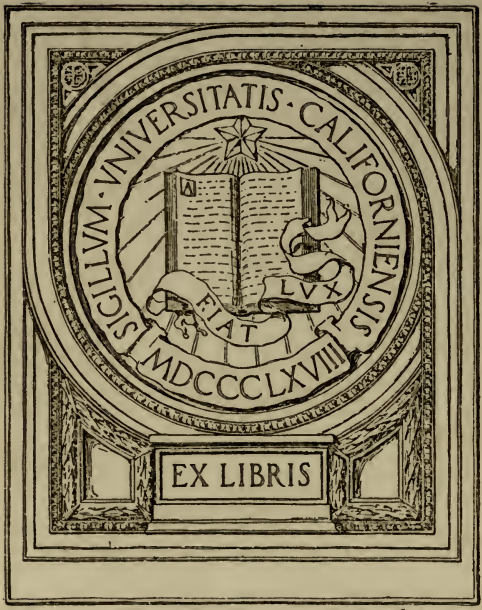
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THEY walked, thus guided by an obsequious waiter, through a light *confetti* of tossed greetings.

GASLIGHT SONATAS

BY

FANNIE HURST

Author of "Just Around the Corner"
"Every Soul Hath Its Song," Etc.

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GASLIGHT SONATAS

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A-T

TO

MY MOTHER

AND

MY FATHER

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GASLIGHT SONATAS

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I

BITTER-SWEET

MUCH of the tragical lore of the infant mortality, the malnutrition, and the five-in-a-room morality of the city's poor is written in statistics, and the statistical path to the heart is more figurative than literal.

It is difficult to write stylistically a per-annum report of 1,327 curvatures of the spine, whereas the poor specific little vertebra of Mamie O'Grady, daughter to Lou, your laundress, whose alcoholic husband once invaded your very own basement and attempted to strangle her in the coal-bin, can instantly create an apron bazaar in the church vestry-rooms.

That is why it is possible to drink your morning coffee without nausea for it, over the head-lines of forty thousand casualties at Ypres, but to push back abruptly at a three-line notice of little Tony's, your corner bootblack's, fatal dive before a street-car.

Gertie Slayback was statistically down as a woman wage-earner; a typhoid case among the thousands of

the Borough of Manhattan for 1901; and her twice-a-day share in the Subway fares collected in the present year of our Lord.

She was a very atomic one of the city's four millions. But after all, what are the kings and peasants, poets and draymen, but great, greater, or greatest, less, lesser, or least atoms of us? If not of the least, Gertie Slayback was of the very lesser. When she unlocked the front door to her rooming-house of evenings, there was no one to expect her, except on Tuesdays, which evening it so happened her week was up. And when she left of mornings with her breakfast crumblessly cleared up and the box of biscuit and condensed-milk can tucked unsuspectedly behind her camisole in the top drawer there was no one to regret her.

There are some of us who call this freedom. Again there are those for whom one spark of home fire burning would light the world.

Gertie Slayback was one of these. Half a lifetime of opening her door upon this or that desert-aisle of hall bedroom had not taught her heart how not to sink or the feel of daily rising in one such room to seem less like a damp bathing-suit, donned at dawn.

The only picture—or call it atavism if you will—which adorned Miss Slayback's dun-colored walls was a passe-partout snowscape, night closing in, and pink cottage windows peering out from under eaves. She could visualize that interior as if she had only to turn the frame for the smell of wood fire and the snap of pine logs and for the scene of two high-back chairs and the wooden crib between.

What a fragile, gracile thing is the mind that can leap thus from nine bargain basement hours of hair-pins and darning-balls to the downy business of lining a crib in Never-Never Land and warming No Man's slippers before the fire of imagination.

There was that picture so acidly etched into Miss Slayback's brain that she had only to close her eyes in the slit-like sanctity of her room and in the brief moment of courting sleep feel the pink penumbra of her vision begin to glow.

Of late years, or, more specifically, for two years and eight months, another picture had invaded, even superseded the old. A stamp-photograph likeness of Mr. James P. Batch in the corner of Miss Slayback's mirror, and thereafter No Man's slippers became number eight-and-a-half C, and the hearth a gilded radiator in a dining-living-room somewhere between the Fourteenth Street Subway and the land of the Bronx.

How Miss Slayback, by habit not gregarious, met Mr. Batch is of no consequence, except to those snug ones of us to whom an introduction is the only means to such an end.

At a six o'clock that invaded even Union Square with heliotrope dusk, Mr. James Batch mistook, who shall say otherwise, Miss Gertie Slayback, as she stepped down into the wintry shade of a Subway kiosk, for Miss Whodoesitmatter. At seven o'clock, over a dish of lamb stew *à la* White Kitchen, he confessed, and if Miss Slayback affected too great surprise and too little indignation, try to conceive six nine-hour week-in-and-week-out days of hair-pins and darning-balls, and then, at a heliotrope dusk,

James P. Batch, in invitational mood, stepping in between it and the papered walls of a dun-colored evening. To further enlist your tolerance, Gertie Slayback's eyes were as blue as the noon of June, and James P. Batch, in a belted-in coat and five kid finger-points protruding ever so slightly and rightly from a breast pocket, was hewn and honed in the image of youth. His the smile of one for whom life's cup holds a heady wine, a wrinkle or two at the eye only serving to enhance that smile; a one-inch feather stuck upright in his derby hatband.

It was a forelock once stamped a Corsican with the look of emperor. It was this hat feather, a cock's feather at that and worn without sense of humor, to which Miss Slayback was fond of attributing the consequences of that heliotrope dusk.

"It was the feather in your cap did it, Jimmie. I can see you yet, stepping up with that innocent grin of yours. You think I didn't know you were flirting? Cousin from Long Island City! 'Say,' I says to myself, I says, 'I look as much like his cousin from Long Island City, if he's got one, as my cousin from Hoboken (and I haven't got any) would look like my sister if I had one.' It was that sassy little feather in your hat!"

They would laugh over this ever-green reminiscence on Sunday Park benches and at intermission at moving pictures when they remained through it to see the show twice. Be the landlady's front parlor ever so permanently rented out, the motion-picture theater has brought to thousands of young city starvelings, if not the quietude of the home, then

at least the warmth and a juxtaposition and a deep darkness that can lave the sub-basement throb of temples and is filled with music with a hum in it.

For two years and eight months of Saturday nights, each one of them a semaphore dropping out across the gray road of the week, Gertie Slayback and Jimmie Batch dined for one hour and sixty cents at the White Kitchen. Then arm and arm up the million-candle-power flare of Broadway, content, these two who had never seen a lake reflect a moon, or a slim fir pointing to a star, that life could be so manifold. And always, too, on Saturday, the tenth from the last row of the De Luxe Cinematograph, Broadway's Best, Orchestra Chairs, fifty cents; Last Ten Rows, thirty-five. The give of velvet-upholstered chairs, perfumed darkness, and any old love story moving across it to the ecstatic ache of Gertie Slayback's high young heart.

On a Saturday evening that was already pointed with stars at the six-o'clock closing of Hoffheimer's Fourteenth Street Emporium, Miss Slayback, whose blondness under fatigue could become ashy, emerged from the Bargain-Basement almost the first of its frantic exodus, taking the place of her weekly appointment in the entrance of the Popular Drug Store adjoining, her gaze, something even frantic in it, sifting the passing crowd.

At six o'clock Fourteenth Street pours up from its basements, down from its lofts, and out from its five-and-ten-cent stores, shows, and arcades, in a great homeward torrent—a sweeping torrent that flows full flush to the Subway, the Elevated, and the surface car, and then spreads thinly into the least

pretentious of the city's homes—the five flights up, the two rooms rear, and the third floor back.

Standing there, this eager tide of the Fourteenth Street Emporium, thus released by the six-o'clock flood-gates, flowed past Miss Slayback. White-nosed, low-chested girls in short-vamp shoes and no-carat gold vanity-cases. Older men resigned that ambition could be flayed by a yard-stick; young men still impatient of their clerkship.

It was into the trickle of these last that Miss Slayback bored her glance, the darting, eager glance of hot eyeballs and inner trembling. She was not so pathetically young as she was pathetically blond, a treacherous, ready-to-fade kind of blondness that one day, now that she had found that very morning her first gray hair, would leave her ashy.

Suddenly, with a small catch of breath that was audible in her throat, Miss Slayback stepped out of that doorway, squirming her way across the tight congestion of the sidewalk to its curb, then in and out, brushing this elbow and that shoulder, worming her way in an absolutely supreme anxiety to keep in view a brown derby hat bobbing right briskly along with the crowd, a greenish-black bit of feather upright in its band.

At Broadway, Fourteenth Street cuts quite a caper, deploying out into Union Square, an island of park, beginning to be succulent at the first false feint of spring, rising as it were from a sea of asphalt. Across this park Miss Slayback worked her rather frenzied way, breaking into a run when the derby threatened to sink into the confusion of a hundred others, and finally learning to keep its course by the

faint but distinguishing fact of a slight dent in the crown. At Broadway, some blocks before that highway bursts into its famous flare, Mr. Batch, than whom it was no other, turned off suddenly at right angles down into a dim pocket of side-street and into the illuminated entrance of Ceiner's Café Hungarian. Meals at all hours. Lunch, thirty cents. Dinner, fifty cents. Our Goulash is Famous.

New York, which expresses itself in more languages to the square block than any other area in the world, Babylon included, loves thus to dine linguistically, so to speak. To the Crescent Turkish Restaurant for its Business Men's Lunch comes Fourth Avenue, whose antique-shop patois reads across the page from right to left. Sight-seeing automobiles on mission and commission bent allow Altoona, Iowa City, and Quincy, Illinois, fifteen minutes' stop-in at Ching Ling-Foo's Chinatown Delmonico's. Spaghetti and red wine have set New York racing to reserve its table d'hôtes. All except the Latin race.

Jimmie Batch, who had first seen light, and that gaslight, in a block in lower Manhattan which has since been given over to a milk-station for a highly congested district, had the palate, if not the purse, of the cosmopolite. His digestive range included *borsch* and *chow maigne; risotta* and ham and.

To-night, as he turned into Café Hungarian, Miss Slayback slowed and drew back into the overshadowing protection of an adjoining office-building. She was breathing hard, and her little face, somehow smaller from chill, was nevertheless a high pink at the cheek-bones.

The wind swept around the corner, jerking her hat, and her hand flew up to it. There was a fair stream of passers-by even here, and occasionally one turned for a backward glance at her standing there so frankly indeterminate.

Suddenly Miss Slayback adjusted her tam-o'-shanter to its flop over her right ear, and, drawing off a pair of dark-blue silk gloves from over immaculately new white ones, entered Ceiner's Café Hungarian. In its light she was not so obviously blonder than young, the pink spots in her cheeks had a deepening value to the blue of her eyes, and a black velvet tam-o'-shanter revealing just the right fringe of vellow curls is no mean aid.

First of all, Ceiner's is an eating-place. There is no music except at five cents in the slot, and its tables for four are perpetually set each with a dish of sliced radishes, a bouquet of celery, and a mound of bread, half the stack rye. Its menus are well thumbed and badly mimeographed. Who enters Ceiner's is prepared to dine from barley soup to apple strudel. At something after six begins the rising sound of cutlery, and already the new-comer fears to find no table.

Off at the side, Mr. Jimmie Batch had already disposed of his hat and gray overcoat, and tilting the chair opposite him to indicate its reservation, shook open his evening paper, the waiter withholding the menu at this sign of rendezvous.

Straight toward that table Miss Slayback worked quick, swift way, through this and that aisle, jerking back and seating herself on the chair opposite

almost before Mr. Batch could raise his eyes from off the sporting page.

There was an instant of silence between them—the kind of silence that can shape itself into a commentary upon the inefficacy of mere speech—a widening silence which, as they sat there facing, deepened until, when she finally spoke, it was as if her words were pebbles dropping down into a well.

"Don't look so surprised, Jimmie," she said, propping her face calmly, even boldly, into the white-kid palms. "You might fall off the Christmas tree."

Above the snug, four-inch collar and bow tie Mr. Batch's face was taking on a dull ox-blood tinge that spread back, even reddening his ears. Mr. Batch had the frontal bone of a clerk, the horn-rimmed glasses of the literarily astigmatic, and the sartorial perfection that only the rich can afford not to attain.

He was staring now quite frankly, and his mouth had fallen open. "Gert!" he said.

"Yes," said Miss Slayback, her insouciance gaining with his discomposure, her eyes widening and then a dolly kind of glassiness seeming to set in. "You wasn't expecting me, Jimmie?"

He jerked up his head, not meeting her glance. "What's the idea of the comedy?"

"You don't look glad to see me, Jimmie."

"If you—think you're funny."

She was working out of and then back into the freshly white gloves in a betraying kind of nervousness that belied the toss of her voice. "Well, of all things! Mad-cat! Mad, just because you didn't seem to be expecting me."

"I— There's some things that are just the limit, that's what they are. Some things that are just the limit, that no fellow would stand from any girl, and this—this is one of them."

Her lips were trembling now. "You—you bet your life there's some things that are just the limit."

He slid out his watch, pushing back. "Well, I guess this place is too small for a fellow and a girl that can follow him around town like a—like—"

She sat forward, grasping the table-sides, her chair tilting with her. "Don't you dare to get up and leave me sitting here! Jimmie Batch, don't you dare!"

The waiter intervened, card extended.

"We—we're waiting for another party," said Miss Slayback, her hands still rigidly over the table-sides and her glance like a steady drill into Mr. Batch's own.

There was a second of this silence while the waiter withdrew, and then Mr. Batch whipped out his watch again, a gun-metal one with an open face.

"Now look here. I got a date here in ten minutes, and one or the other of us has got to clear. You—you're one too many, if you got to know it."

"Oh, I do know it, Jimmie! I been one too many for the last four Saturday nights. I been one too many ever since May Scully came into five hundred dollars' inheritance and quit the Ladies' Neckwear. I been one too many ever since May Scully became a lady."

"If I was a girl and didn't have more shame!"

"Shame! Now you're shouting, Jimmie Batch.

I haven't got shame, and I don't care who knows it. A girl don't stop to have shame when she's fighting for her rights."

He was leaning on his elbow, profile to her. "That movie talk can't scare me. You can't tell me what to do and what not to do. I've given you a square deal all right. There's not a word ever passed between us that ties me to your apron-strings. I don't say I'm not without my obligations to you, but that's not one of them. No, sirree—no apron-strings."

"I know it isn't, Jimmie. You're the kind of a fellow wouldn't even talk to himself for fear of committing hisself."

"I got a date here now any minute, Gert, and the sooner you—"

"You're the guy who passed up the Sixty-first for the Safety First regiment."

"I'll show you my regiment some day."

"I—I know you're not tied to my apron-strings, Jimmie. I—I wouldn't have you there for anything. Don't you think I know you too well for that? That's just it. Nobody on God's earth knows you the way I do. I know you better than you know yourself."

"You better beat it, Gertie. I tell you I'm getting sore."

Her face flashed from him to the door and back again, her anxiety almost edged with hysteria. "Come on, Jimmie—out the side entrance before she gets here. May Scully ain't the company for you. You think if she was, honey, I'd—I'd see myself come butting in between you this way, like

—like a—common girl? She's not the girl to keep you straight. Honest to God she's not, honey."

"My business is my business, let me tell you that."

"She's speedy, Jimmie. She was the speediest girl on the main floor, and now that she's come into those five hundred, instead of planting it for a rainy day, she's quit work and gone plumb crazy with it."

"When I want advice about my friends I ask for it."

"It's not her good name that worries me, Jimmie, because she 'ain't got any. It's you. She's got you crazy with that five hundred, too—that's what's got me scared."

"Gee! you ought to let the Salvation Army tie a bonnet under your chin."

"She's always had her eyes on you, Jimmie. 'Ain't you men got no sense for seein' things? Since the day they moved the Gents' Furnishings across from the Ladies' Neckwear she's had you spotted. Her goings-on used to leak down to the basement, alrighty. She's not a good girl, May ain't, Jimmie. She ain't, and you know it. Is she? Is she?"

"Aw!" said Jimmie Batch.

"You see! See! 'Ain't got the nerve to answer, have you?"

"Aw—maybe I know, too, that she's not the kind of a girl that would turn up where she's not—"

"If you wasn't a classy-looking kind of boy, Jimmie, that a fly girl like May likes to be seen out with, she couldn't find you with magnifying glasses, not if you was born with the golden rule in your mouth and had swallowed it. She's not the kind of girl, Jimmie, a fellow like you needs behind him,

If—if you was ever to marry her and get your hands on them five hundred dollars—"

"It would be my business."

"It 'll be your ruination. You're not strong enough to stand up under nothing like that. With a few hundred unearned dollars in your pocket you—you'd go up in spontaneous combustion, you would."

"It would be my own spontaneous combustion."

"You got to be drove, Jimmie, like a kid. With them few dollars you wouldn't start up a little cigar-store like you think you would. You and her would blow yourselves to the dogs in two months. Cigar-stores ain't the place for you, Jimmie. You seen how only clerking in them was nearly your ruination—the little gambling-room-in-the-back kind that you pick out. They ain't cigar-stores; they're only false faces for gambling."

"You know it all, don't you?"

"Oh, I'm dealing it to you straight! There's too many sporty crowds loafing around those joints for a fellow like you to stand up under. I found you in one, and as yellow-fingered and as loafing as they come, a new job a week, a—"

"Yeh, and there was some pep to variety, too."

"Don't throw over, Jimmie, what my getting you out of it to a decent job in a department store has begun to do for you. And you're making good, too. Higgins told me to-day, if you don't let your head swell, there won't be a fellow in the department can stack up his sales-book any higher."

"Aw!"

"Don't throw it all over, Jimmie—and me—for a

crop of dyed red hair and a few dollars to ruin yourself with."

He shot her a look of constantly growing nervousness, his mouth pulled to an oblique, his glance constantly toward the door.

"Don't keep no date with her to-night, Jimmie. You haven't got the constitution to stand her pace. It's telling on you. Look at those fingers yellowing again—looka—"

"They're my fingers, ain't they?"

"You see, Jimmie, I—I'm the only person in the world that likes you just for what—you ain't—and hasn't got any pipe dreams about you. That's what counts, Jimmie, the folks that like you in spite, and not because of."

"We will now sing psalm number two hundred and twenty-three."

"I know there's not a better fellow in the world if he's kept nailed to the right job, and I know, too, there's not another fellow can go to the dogs any easier."

"To hear you talk, you'd think I was about six."

"I'm the only girl that 'll ever be willing to make a whip out of herself that 'll keep you going and won't sting, honey. I know you're soft and lazy and selfish and—"

"Don't forget any."

"And I know you're my good-looking good-for-nothing, and I know, too, that you—you don't care as much—as much for me from head to toe as I do for your little finger. But I—I like you just the same, Jimmie. That—that's what I mean about

having no shame. I—do like you so—so terribly, Jimmie."

"Aw now—Gert!"

"I know it, Jimmie—that I ought to be ashamed. Don't think I haven't cried myself to sleep with it whole nights in succession."

"Aw now—Gert!"

"Don't think I don't know it, that I'm laying myself before you pretty common. I know it's common for a girl to—to come to a fellow like this, but—but I haven't got any shame about it—I haven't got anything, Jimmie, except fight for—for what's eating me. And the way things are between us now is eating me."

"I— Why, I got a mighty high regard for you, Gert."

"There's a time in a girl's life, Jimmie, when she's been starved like I have for something of her own all her days; there's times, no matter how she's held in, that all of a sudden comes a minute when she busts out."

"I understand, Gert, but—"

"For two years and eight months, Jimmie, life has got to be worth while living to me because I could see the day, even if we—you—never talked about it, when you would be made over from a flip kid to—to the kind of a fellow would want to settle down to making a little—two-by-four home for us. A—little two-by-four all our own, with you steady on the job and advanced maybe to forty or fifty a week and—"

"For God's sake, Gertie, this ain't the time or the place to—"

"Oh yes, it is! It's got to be, because it's the first time in four weeks that you didn't see me coming first."

"But not now, Gert. I—"

"I'm not ashamed to tell you, Jimmie Batch, that I've been the making of you since that night you threw the wink at me. And—and it hurts, this does. God! how it hurts!"

He was pleating the table-cloth, swallowing as if his throat had constricted, and still rearing his head this way and that in the tight collar.

"I—never claimed not to be a bad egg. This ain't the time and the place for rehashing, that's all. Sure you been a friend to me. I don't say you haven't. Only I can't be bossed by a girl like you. I don't say May Scully's any better than she ought to be. Only that's my business. You hear? my business. I got to have life and see a darn sight more future for myself than selling shirts in a Fourteenth Street department store."

"May Scully can't give it to you—her and her fast crowd."

"Maybe she can and maybe she can't."

"Them few dollars won't make you; they'll break you."

"That's for her to decide, not you."

"I'll tell her myself. I'll face her right here and—"

"Now, look here, if you think I'm going to be let in for a holy show between you two girls, you got another think coming. One of us has got to clear out of here, and quick, too. You been talking about the side door; there it is. In five minutes I got a date in this place that I thought I could keep like

any law-abiding citizen. One of us has got to clear, and quick, too. God! you wimmin make me sick, the whole lot of you!"

"If anything makes you sick, I know what it is. It's dodging me to fly around all hours of the night with May Scully, the girl who put the tang in tango. It's eating around in swell sixty-cent restaurants like this and—"

"Gad! your middle name ought to be Nagalene."

"Aw, now, Jimmie, maybe it does sound like nagging, but it ain't, honey. It—it's only my—my fear that I'm losing you, and—and my hate for the every-day grind of things, and—"

"I can't help that, can I?"

"Why, there—there's nothing on God's earth I hate, Jimmie, like I hate that Bargain-Basement. When I think it's down there in that manhole I've spent the best years of my life, I—I wanna die. The day I get out of it, the day I don't have to punch that old time-clock down there next to the Complaints and Adjustment Desk, I—I'll never put my foot below sidewalk level again to the hour I die. Not even if it was to take a walk in my own gold-mine."

"It ain't exactly a garden of roses down there."

"Why, I hate it so terrible, Jimmie, that sometimes I wake up nights gritting my teeth with the smell of steam-pipes and the tramp of feet on the glass sidewalk up over me. Oh. God! you dunno—you dunno!"

"When it comes to that the main floor ain't exactly a maiden's dream, or a fellow's, for that matter."

"With a man it's different, It's his job in life,

earning, and—and the woman making the two ends of it meet. That's why, Jimmie, these last two years and eight months, if not for what I was hoping for us, why—why—I—why, on your twenty a week, Jimmie, there's nobody could run a flat like I could. Why, the days wouldn't be long enough to putter in. I— Don't throw away what I been building up for us, Jimmie, step by step! Don't, Jimmie!"

"Good Lord, girl! You deserve better 'n me."

"I know I got a big job, Jimmie, but I want to make a man out of you, temper, laziness, gambling, and all. You got it in you to be something more than a tango lizard or a cigar-store bum, honey. It's only you 'ain't got the stuff in you to stand up under a five-hundred-dollar windfall and—a—and a sporty girl. If—if two glasses of beer make you as silly as they do, Jimmie, why, five hundred dollars would land you under the table for life."

"Aw—there you go again!"

"I can't help it, Jimmie. It's because I never knew a fellow had what's he's cut out for written all over him so. You're a born clerk, Jimmie.

"Sure, I'm a slick clerk, but—"

"You're born to be a clerk, a good clerk, even a two-hundred-a-month clerk, the way you can win the trade, but never your own boss. I know what I'm talking about. I know your measure better than any human on earth can ever know your measure. I know things about you that you don't even know yourself."

"I never set myself up to nobody for anything I wasn't."

"Maybe not, Jimmie, but I know about you and —and that Central Street gang that time, and—"

"You!"

"Yes, honey, and there's not another human living but me knows how little it was your fault. Just bad company, that was all. That's how much I—I love you, Jimmie, enough to understand that. Why, if I thought May Scully and a set-up in business was the thing for you, Jimmie, I'd say to her, I'd say, if it was like taking my own heart out in my hand and squashing it, I'd say to her, I'd say, 'Take him, May.' That's how I—I love you, Jimmie. Oh, ain't it nothing, honey, a girl can come here and lay herself this low to you—"

"Well, haven't I just said you—you deserve better."

"I don't want better, Jimmie. I want you. I want to take hold of your life and finish the job of making it the kind we can both be proud of. Us two, Jimmie, in—in our own decent two-by-four. Shopping on Saturday nights. Frying in our own frying-pan in our own kitchen. Listening to our own phonograph in our own parlor. Geraniums and —and kids—and—and things. Gas-logs. Stationary washtubs. Jimmie! Jimmie!"

Mr. James P. Batch reached up for his hat and overcoat, cramming the newspaper into a rear pocket.

"Come on," he said, stalking toward the side door and not waiting to see her to her feet.

Outside, a banner of stars was over the narrow street. For a chain of five blocks he walked, with a silence and speed that Miss Slayback could only match with a running quickstep. But she was not

out of breath. Her head was up, and her hand, where it hooked into Mr. Batch's elbow, was in a vise that tightened with each block.

You who will mete out no other approval than that vouched for by the stamp of time and whose contempt for the contemporary is from behind the easy refuge of the classics, suffer you the shuddering analogy that between Aspasia who inspired Pericles, Theodora who suggested the Justinian code, and Gertie Slayback who commandeered Jimmie Batch, is a sistership which rounds them, like a lasso thrown back into time, into one and the same petticoat dynasty behind the throne.

True, Gertie Slayback's *mise en scène* was a two-room kitchenette apartment situated in the Bronx at a surveyor's farthest point between two Subway stations, and her present state one of frequent red-faced forays down into a packing-case. But there was that in her eyes which witchingly bespoke the conquered, but not the conqueror. Hers was actually the titillating wonder of a bird which, captured, closes its wings, that surrender can be so sweet.

Once she sat on the edge of the packing-case, dallying a hammer, then laid it aside suddenly, to cross the littered room and place the side of her head to the immaculate waistcoat of Mr. Jimmie Batch, red-faced, too, over wrenching up with hatchet-edge a barrel-top.

"Jimmie darling, I—I just never will get over your finding this place for us."

Mr. Batch wiped his forearm across his brow, his

voice jerking between the squeak of nails extracted from wood.

"It was you, honey. You give me the to-let ad. and I came to look, that's all."

"Just the samey, it was my boy found it. If you hadn't come to look we might have been forced into taking that old dark coop over on Simpson Street."

"What's all this junk in this barrel?"

"Them's kitchen utensils, honey."

"Kitchen what?"

"Kitchen things that you don't know nothing about except to eat good things out of."

"What's this?"

"Don't bend it! That's a celery-brush. Ain't it cute?"

"A celery-brush! Why didn't you get it a comb, too?"

"Aw, now, honey-bee, don't go trying to be funny and picking through these things you don't know nothing about! They're just cute things I'm going to cook something grand suppers in, for my something awful bad boy."

He leaned down to kiss her at that. "Gee!"

She was standing, her shoulder to him and head thrown back against his chest. She looked up to stroke his cheek, her face foreshortened.

"I'm all black and blue pinching myself, Jimmie."

"Me too."

"Every night when I get home from working here in the flat I say to myself in the looking-glass, I say, 'Gertie Slayback, what if you're only dreamin'?'"

"Me too."

"I say to myself, 'Are you sure that darling flat up there, with the new pink-and-white wall-paper and the furniture arriving every day, is going to be yours in a few days when you're Mrs. Jimmie Batch?'"

"Mrs. Jimmie Batch—say, that's immense."

"I keep saying it to myself every night, 'One day less.' Last night it was two days. To-night it 'll be—one day, Jimmie, till I'm—her."

She closed her eyes and let her hand linger up at his cheek, head still back against him, so that, inclining his head, he could rest his lips in the ash-blond fluff of her hair.

"Talk about can't wait! If to-morrow was any farther off they'd have to sweep out a padded cell for me."

She turned to rumple the smooth light thatch of his hair. "Bad boy! Can't wait! And here we are getting married all of a sudden, just like that. Up to the time of this draft business, Jimmie Batch, 'pretty soon' was the only date I could ever get out of you, and now here you are crying over one day's wait. Bad honey boy!"

He reached back for the pink newspaper so habitually protruding from his hip pocket. "You ought to see the way they're neck-breaking for the marriage-license bureaus since the draft. First thing we know, the whole shebang of the boys will be claiming the exemption of sole support of wife."

"It's a good thing we made up our minds quick, Jimmie. They'll be getting wise. If too many get exemption from the army by marrying right away, it 'll be a give-away."

"I'd like to know who can lay his hands on the exemption of a little wife to support."

"Oh, Jimmie, it—it sounds so funny. Being supported! Me that always did the supporting, not only to me, but to my mother and great-grandmother up to the day they died."

"I'm the greatest little supporter you ever seen."

"Me getting up mornings to stay at home in my own darling little flat, and no basement or time-clock. Nothing but a busy little hubby to eat him nice, smelly, bacon breakfast and grab him nice morning newspaper, kiss him wifie, and run downtown to support her. Jimmie, every morning for your breakfast I'm going to fry—"

"You bet your life he's going to support her, and he's going to pay back that forty dollars of his girl's that went into his wedding duds, that hundred and ninety of his girl's savings that went into furniture—"

"We got to meet our instalments every month first, Jimmie. That's what we want—no debts and every little darling piece of furniture paid up."

"We—I'm going to pay it, too."

"And my Jimmie is going to work to get himself promoted and quit being a sorehead at his steady hours and all."

"I know more about selling, honey, than the whole bunch of dubs in that store put together if they'd give me a chance to prove it."

She laid her palm to his lips.

"'Shh-h-h! You don't nothing of the kind. It's not conceit, it's work is going to get my boy his raise."

"If they'd listen to me, that department would—"

"'Shh-h! J. G. Hoffheimer don't have to get pointers from Jimmie Batch how to run his department store."

"There you go again. What's J. G. Hoffheimer got that I 'ain't? Luck and a few dollars in his pocket that, if I had in mine, would—"

"It was his own grit put those dollars there, Jimmie. Just put it out of your head that it's luck makes a self-made man."

"Self-made! You mean things just broke right for him. That's two-thirds of this self-made business."

"You mean he buckled right down to brass tacks, and that's what my boy is going to do."

"The trouble with this world is it takes money to make money. Get your first few dollars, I always say, no matter how, and then when you're on your feet scratch your conscience if it itches. That's why I said in the beginning, if we had took that hundred and ninety furniture money and staked it on—"

"Jimmie, please—please! You wouldn't want to take a girl's savings of years and years to gamble on a sporty cigar proposition with a card-room in the rear. You wouldn't, Jimmie. You ain't that kind of fellow. Tell me you wouldn't, Jimmie."

He turned away to dive down into the barrel. "Naw," he said, "I wouldn't."

The sun had receded, leaving a sudden sullen gray, the little square room, littered with an upheaval of excelsior, sheet-shrouded furniture, and the paperhanger's paraphernalia and inimitable smells, darkening and seeming to chill.

"We got to quit now, Jimmie. It's getting dark and the gas ain't turned on in the meter yet."

He rose up out of the barrel, holding out at arm's-length what might have been a tinsmith's version of a porcupine.

"What in— What's this thing that scratched me?"

She danced to take it. "It's a grater, a darling grater for horseradish and nutmeg and cocoanut. I'm going to fix you a cocoanut cake for our honeymoon supper to-morrow night, honey-bee. Essie Wohlgemuth over in the cake-demonstrating department is going to bring me the recipe. Cocoanut cake! And I'm going to fry us a little steak in this darling little skillet. Ain't it the cutest!"

"Cute she calls a tin skillet."

"Look what's pasted on it. 'Little Housewife's Skillet. The Kitchen Fairy.' That's what I'm going to be, Jimmie, the kitchen fairy. Give me that. It's a rolling-pin. All my life I've wanted a rolling-pin. Look, honey, a little string to hang it up by. I'm going to hang everything up in rows. It's going to look like Tiffany's kitchen, all shiny. Give me, honey; that's an egg-beater. Look at it whiz. And this—this is a pan for war bread. I'm going to make us war bread to help the soldiers."

"You're a little soldier yourself," he said.

"That's what I would be if I was a man, a soldier all in brass buttons."

"There's a bunch of the fellows going," said Mr. Batch, standing at the window, looking out over roofs, dilly-dallying up and down on his heels and breaking into a low, contemplative whistle.

She was at his shoulder, peering over it. "You wouldn't be afraid, would you, Jimmie?"

"You bet your life I wouldn't."

She was tiptoes now, her arms creeping up to him. "Only my boy's got a wife—a brand-new wifie to support, 'ain't he?"

"That's what he has," said Mr. Batch, stroking her forearm, but still gazing through and beyond whatever roofs he was seeing.

"Jimmie!"

"Huh?"

"Look! We got a view of the Hudson River from our flat, just like we lived on Riverside Drive."

"All the Hudson River I can see is fifteen smoke-stacks and somebody's wash-line out."

"It ain't so. We got a grand view. Look! Stand on tiptoe, Jimmie, like me. There, between that water-tank on that black roof over there and them two chimneys. See? Watch my finger. A little stream of something over there that moves."

"No, I don't see."

"Look, honey-bee, close! See that little streak?"

"All right, then, if you see it I see it."

"To think we got a river view from our flat! It's like living in the country. I'll peek out at it all day long. God! honey, I just never will be over the happiness of being done with basements."

"It was swell of old Higgins to give us this half-Saturday. It shows where you stood with the management, Gert—this and a five-dollar gold piece. Lord knows they wouldn't pony up that way if it was me getting married by myself."

"It's because my boy 'ain't shown them down

there yet the best that's in him. You just watch his little safety-first wife see to it that from now on he keeps up her record of never in seven years punching the time-clock even one minute late, and that he keeps his stock shelves O. K. and shows his department he's a comer-on."

"With that bunch of boobs a fellow's got a swell chance to get anywheres."

"It's getting late, Jimmie. It don't look nice for us to stay here so late alone, not till—to-morrow. Ruby and Essie and Charley are going to meet us in the minister's back parlor at ten sharp in the morning. We can be back here by noon and get the place cleared enough to give 'em a little lunch—just a fun lunch without fixings."

"I hope the old guy don't waste no time splicing us. It's one of the things a fellow likes to have over with."

"Jimmie! Why, it's the most beautiful thing in the world, like a garden of lilies or—or something, a marriage ceremony is! You got the ring safe, honey-bee, and the license?"

"Pinned in my pocket where you put 'em, Flirty Gertie."

"Flirty Gertie! Now you'll begin teasing me with that all our life—the way I didn't slap your face that night when I should have. I just couldn't have, honey. Goes to show we were just cut and dried for each other, don't it? Me, a girl that never in her life let a fellow even bat his eyes at her without an introduction. But that night when you winked, honey—something inside of me just winked back."

"My girl!"

"You mean it, boy? You ain't sorry about nothing, Jimmie?"

"Sorry? Well, I guess not!"

"You seen the way—she—May—you seen for yourself what she was, when we seen her walking, that next night after Ceiner's, nearly staggering, up Sixth Avenue with Budge Evans."

"I never took no stock in her, honey. I was just letting her like me."

She sat back on the box edge, regarding him, her face so soft and wont to smile that she could not keep its composure.

"Get me my hat and coat, honey. We'll walk down. Got the key?"

They skirmished in the gloom, moving through slit-like aisles of furniture and packing-box.

"Ouch!"

"Oh, the running water is hot, Jimmie, just like the ad. said! We got red-hot running water in our flat. Close the front windows, honey. We don't want it to rain in on our new green sofa. Not till it's paid for, anyways."

"Hurry."

"I'm ready."

They met at the door, kissing on the inside and the outside of it; at the head of the fourth and the third and the second balustrade down.

"We'll always make 'em little love landings, Jimmie, so we can't ever get tired climbing them."

"Yep."

Outside there was still a pink glow in a clean sky. The first flush of spring in the air had died, leaving

chill. They walked briskly, arm in arm, down the asphalt incline of sidewalk leading from their apartment-house, a new street of canned homes built on a hillside—the sepulchral abode of the city's trapped whose only escape is down the fire-escape, and then only when the alternative is death. At the base of the hill there flows, in constant hubbub, a great up-and-down artery of street, repeating itself, mile after mile, in terms of the butcher, the baker, and the every-other-corner drug-store of a million-dollar corporation. Housewives with perambulators and oil-cloth shopping bags. Children on roller-skates. The din of small tradesmen and the humdrum of every city block where the homes remain unboarded all summer and every wife is on haggling terms with the purveyor of her evening roundsteak and mess of rutabaga.

Then there is the soap-box provender, too, sure of a crowd, offering creed, propaganda, patent medicine, and politics. It is the pulpit of the reformer and the housetop of the fanatic, this soap-box. From it the voice to the city is often a pious one, an impious one, and almost always a raucous one. Luther and Sophocles and even a Citizen of Nazareth made of the four winds of the street corner the walls of a temple of wisdom. What more fitting acropolis for freedom of speech than the great out-of-doors!

Turning from the incline of cross-street into this petty Bagdad of the petty wise, the voice of the street corner lifted itself above the inarticulate din of the thoroughfare. A youth, thewed like an ox, surmounted on a stack of three self-provided canned-

goods boxes, his in-at-the-waist silhouette thrown out against a sky that was almost ready to break out in stars; a crowd tightening about him.

"It's a soldier boy talkin', Gert."

"If it ain't!" They tiptoed at the fringe of the circle, heads back.

"Look, Gert, he's a lieutenant; he's got a shoulder-bar. And those four down there holding the flags are just privates. You can always tell a lieutenant by the bar."

"Uh-huh."

"Say, them boys do stack up some for Uncle Sam."

"'Shh-h-h, Jimmie!"

"I'm here to tell you that them boys stack up some."

A banner stiffened out in the breeze, Mr. Batch reading: "Enlist before you are drafted. Last chance to beat the draft. Prove your patriotism. Enlist now! Your country calls!"

"Come on," said Mr. Batch.

"Wait. I want to hear what he's saying."

". . . there's not a man here before me can afford to shirk his duty to his country. The slacker can't get along without his country, but his country can very easily get along without him."

Cheers.

"The poor exemption boobs are already running for doctors' certificates and marriage licenses, but even if they get by with it—and it is ninety-nine to one they won't—they can't run away from their own degradation and shame."

"Come on, Jimmie."

"Wait."

"Men of America, for every one of you who tries to dodge his duty to his country there is a yellow streak somewhere underneath the hide of you. Women of America, every one of you that helps to foster the spirit of cowardice in your particular man or men is helping to make a coward. It's the cowards and the quitters and the slackers and dodgers that need this war more than the patriotic ones who are willing to buckle on and go!

"Don't be a buttonhole patriot! A government that is good enough to live under is good enough to fight under!"

Cheers.

"If there is any reason on earth has manifested itself for this devastating and terrible war it is that it has been a maker of men.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am back from four months in the trenches with the French army, and I've come home, now that my own country is at war, to give her every ounce of energy I've got to offer. As soon as a hole in my side is healed up I'm going back to those trenches, and I want to say to you that them four months of mine face to face with life and with death have done more for me than all my twenty-four civilian years put together."

Cheers.

"I'll be a different man, if I live to come back home after this war and take up my work again as a draftsman. Why, I've seen weaklings and self-confessed failures and even ninnies go into them trenches and come out—oh yes, plenty of them do come out—men. Men that have got close enough

down to the facts of things to feel new realizations of what life means come over them. Men that have gotten back their pep, their ambitions, their unselfishness. That's what war can do for your men, you women who are helping them to foster the spirit of holding back, of cheating their government. That's what war can do for your men. Make of them the kind of men who some day can face their children without having to hang their heads. Men who can answer for their part in making the world a safe place for democracy."

An hour they stood there, the air quieting but chilling, and lavishly sown stars cropping out. Street lights had come out, too, throwing up in ever darker relief the figure above the heads of the crowd. His voice had coarsened and taken on a raw edge, but every gesture was flung from the socket, and from where they had forced themselves into the tight circle Gertie Slayback, her mouth fallen open and her head still back, could see the sinews of him ripple under khaki and the diaphragm lift for voice.

There was a shift of speakers then, this time a private, still too rangy, but his looseness of frame seeming already to conform to the exigency of uniform.

"Come on, Jimmie. I—I'm cold."

They worked out into the freedom of the sidewalk, and for ten minutes, down blocks of petty shops already lighted, walked in a silence that grew apace.

He was suddenly conscious that she was crying, quietly, her handkerchief wadded against her mouth. He strode on with a scowl and his head bent.

"Let's sit down in this little park, Jimmie. I'm tired."

They rested on a bench on one of those small triangles of breathing-space which the city ekes out now and then; mill ends of land parcels.

He took immediately to roving the toe of his shoe in and out among the gravel. She stole out her hand to his arm.

"Well, Jimmie?" Her voice was in the gauze of a whisper that hardly left her throat.

"Well, what?" he said, still toeing.

"There—there's a lot of things we never thought about, Jimmie."

"Aw!"

"Eh, Jimmie?"

"You mean *you* never thought about."

"What do you mean?"

"I know what I mean alrighty."

"I—I was the one that suggested it, Jimmie, but—but you fell in. I—I just couldn't bear to think of it, Jimmie—your going and all. I suggested it, but—but you fell in."

"Say, when a fellow's shoved he falls. I never gave a thought to sneaking an exemption until it was put in my head. I'd smash the fellow in the face that calls me coward, I will."

"You could have knocked me down with a feather, Jimmie, looking at it his way, all of a sudden."

"You couldn't me. Don't think I was ever strong for the whole business. I mean the exemption part. I wasn't going to say nothing. What's the use, seeing the way you had your heart set on—on things? But the whole business, if you want to

know it, went against my grain. I'll smash the fellow in the face that calls me coward."

"I know, Jimmie; you—you're right. It was me suggested hurrying things like this. Sneakin'! Oh, God! ain't I the messer-up!"

"Lay easy, girl. I'm going to see it through. I guess there's been fellows before me and will be after me who have done worse. I'm going to see it through. All I got to say is I'll smash up the fellow calls me coward. Come on, forget it. Let's go."

She was close to him, her cheek crinkled against his with the frank kind of social unconsciousness the park bench seems to engender.

"Come on, Gert. I got a hunger on."

"'Shh-h-h, Jimmie! Let me think. I'm thinking."

"Too much thinking killed a cat. Come on."

"Jimmie!"

"Huh?"

"Jimmie—would you—had you ever thought about being a soldier?"

"Sure. I came in an ace of going into the army that time after—after that little Central Street trouble of mine. I've got a book in my trunk this minute on military tactics. Wouldn't surprise me a bit to see me land in the army some day."

"It's a fine thing, Jimmie, for a fellow — the army."

"Yeh, good for what ails him."

She drew him back, pulling at his shoulder so that finally he faced her. "Jimmie!"

"Huh?"

"I got an idea."

"Shoot."

"You remember once, honey-bee, how I put it to you that night at Ceiner's how, if it was for your good, no sacrifice was too much to make."

"Forget it."

"You didn't believe it."

"Aw, say now, what's the use digging up ancient history?"

"You'd be right, Jimmie, not to believe it. I haven't lived up to what I said."

"Oh Lord, honey! What's eating you now? Come to the point."

She would not meet his eyes, turning her head from him to hide lips that would quiver. "Honey, it—it ain't coming off—that's all. Not now—anyways."

"What ain't?"

"Us."

"Who?"

"You know what I mean, Jimmie. It's like everything the soldier boy on the corner just said. I—I saw you getting red clear behind your ears over it. I—I was, too, Jimmie. It's like that soldier boy was put there on that corner just to show me, before it was too late, how wrong I been in every one of my ways. Us women who are helping to foster slackers. That's what we're making of them—slackers for life. And here I been thinking it was your good I had in mind, when all along it's been mine. That's what it's been, mine!"

"Aw, now, Gert—"

"You got to go, Jimmie. You got to go, because you want to go and—because I want you to go."

"Where?"

"To war."

He took hold of her two arms because they were trembling. "Aw, now, Gert, I didn't say anything complaining. I—"

"You did, Jimmie, you did, and—and I never was so glad over you that you did complain. I just never was so glad. I want you to go, Jimmie. I want you to go and get a man made out of you. They'll make a better job out of you than ever I can. I want you to get the yellow streak washed out. I want you to get to be all the things he said you would. For every line he was talking up there, I could see my boy coming home to me some day better than anything I could make out of him, baby-ing him the way I can't help doing. I could see you, honey-bee, coming back to me with the kind of lift to your head a fellow has when he's been fighting to make the world a safe place for dem—for whatever it was he said. I want you to go, Jimmie. I want you to beat the draft, too. Nothing on earth can make me not want you to go."

"Why, Gert—you're kiddin'!"

"Honey, you want to go, don't you? You want to square up those shoulders and put on khaki, don't you? Tell me you want to go!"

"Why—why, yes, Gert, if—"

"Oh, you're going, Jimmie! You're going!"

"Why, girl—you're crazy! Our flat! Our furniture—our—"

"What's a flat? What's furniture? What's anything? There's not a firm in business wouldn't take back a boy's furniture—a boy's everything—that's

going out to fight for—for dem-o-cracy! What's a flat? What's anything?"

He let drop his head to hide his eyes.

Do you know it is said that on the Desert of Sahara, the slope of Sorrento, and the marble of Fifth Avenue the sun can shine whitest? There is an iridescence to its glittering on bleached sand, blue bay, and Carrara façade that is sheer light distilled to its utmost.

On one such day when, standing on the high slope of Fifth Avenue where it rises toward the Park, and looking down on it, surging to and fro, it was as if, so manifest the brilliancy, every head wore a tin helmet, parrying sunlight at a thousand angles of refraction.

Parade-days, all this glittering midstream is swept to the clean sheen of a strip of moiré, this splendid desolation blocked on each side by crowds half the density of the sidewalk.

On one of these sun-drenched Saturdays dedicated by a growing tradition to this or that national expression, the Ninety-ninth Regiment, to a flare of music that made the heart leap out against its walls, turned into a scene thus swept clean for it, a wave of olive drab, impeccable row after impeccable row of scissors-like legs advancing. Recruits, raw if you will, but already caparisoned, sniffing and scenting, as it were, for the great primordial mire of war.

There is no state of being so finely sensitized as national consciousness. A gauntlet down and it surges up. One ripple of a flag defended can goose-flesh a

nation. How bitter and how sweet it is to give a soldier!

To the seething kinetic chemistry of such mingling emotions there were women who stood in the frontal crowds of the sidewalks stifling hysteria, or ran after in terror at sight of one so personally hers, receding in that great impersonal wave of olive drab.

And yet the air was martial with banner and with shout. And the ecstasy of such moments is like a dam against reality, pressing it back. It is in the pompless watches of the night or of too long days that such dams break, excoriating.

For the thirty blocks of its course Gertie Slayback followed that wave of men, half run and half walk. Down from the curb, and at the beck and call of this or that policeman up again, only to find opportunity for still another dive out from the invisible roping off of the sidewalk crowds.

From the middle of his line, she could see, sometimes, the tail of Jimmie Batch's glance roving for her, but to all purports his eye was solely for his own replica in front of him, and at such times, when he marched, his back had a little additional straightness that was almost swayback.

Nor was Gertie Slayback crying. On the contrary, she was inclined to laughter. A little too inclined to a high and brittle sort of dissonance over which she seemed to have no control.

"'By, Jimmie! So long! Jimmie! You-hoo!"

Tramp. Tramp. Tramp-tramp-tramp.

"You-hoo! Jimmie! So long, Jimmie!"

At Fourteenth Street, and to the solemn stroke of one from a tower, she broke off suddenly without

even a second look back, dodging under the very arms of the crowd as she ran out from it.

She was one and three-quarter minutes late when she punched the time-clock beside the Complaints and Adjustment Desk in the Bargain-Basement.

II

SIEVE OF FULFILMENT

HOW constant a stream is the runnel of men's small affairs!

Dynasties may totter and half the world bleed to death, but one or the other corner *pâtisserie* goes on forever.

At a moment when the shadow of world-war was over the country like a pair of black wings lowering Mrs. Harry Ross, who swooned at the sight of blood from a penknife scratch down the hand of her son, but yawned over the head-line statistics of the casualties at Verdun, lifted a lid from a pot that exuded immediate savory fumes, prodded with a fork at its content, her concern boiled down to deal solely with stew.

An alarm-clock on a small shelf edged in scalloped white oilcloth ticked with spick-and-span precision into a kitchen so correspondingly spick and span that even its silence smelled scoured, rows of tins shining into it. A dun-colored kind of dusk, soot floating in it, began to filter down the air-shaft, dimming them.

Mrs. Ross lowered the shade and lighted the gas-jet. So short that in the long run she wormed first

through a crowd, she was full of the genial curves that, though they bespoke three lumps in her coffee and an elevator and escalator age, had not yet reached uncongenial proportions. In fact, now, brushing with her bare forearm across her moistly pink face, she was like Flora, who, rather than fade, became buxom.

A door slammed in an outer hall, she still stirring and looking down into the stew.

"Edwin!"

"Yes, mother."

"Don't track through the parlor."

"Aw!"

"You hear me?"

"I yain't! Gee, can't a feller walk?"

"Put your books in the hat-rack."

"I yam."

She supped up bird-like from the tip of her spoon, smacking for flavor.

"I made you an asafetida-bag, Edwin; it's in your drawer. Don't you leave this house to-morrow without it on."

"Aw—w—w—w—w!"

"It don't smell."

"Where's my stamp-book?"

"On your table, where it belongs."

"Gee whiz! if you got my Argentine stamps mixed!"

"Get washed."

"Where's my batteries?"

"Under your bed, where they belong."

"I'm hungry."

"Your father 'll be home any minute now. Don't spoil your appetite."

"I got ninety in manual training, mother."

"Did yuh, Edwin?"

"All the other fellows only got seventy and eighty."

"Mamma's boy leads 'em."

He entered at that, submitting to a kiss upon an averted cheek.

"See what mother's fixed for you!"

"M-m-m-m! fritters!"

"Don't touch!"

"M-m-m-m—lamb stew!"

"I shopped all morning to get okra to go in it for your father."

"M-m-m-m-m!"

She tiptoed up to kiss him again, this time at the back of the neck, carefully averting her floury hands.

"Mamma's boy! I made you three pen-wipers to-day out of the old red table-cover."

"Aw, fellers don't use pen-wipers!"

He set up a jiggling, his great feet coming down with a clatter.

"Stop!"

"Can't I jig?"

"No; not with neighbors underneath."

He flopped down, hooking his heels in the chair-rung.

At sixteen's stage of cruel hazing into man's estate Edwin Ross, whose voice, all in a breath, could slip up from the quality of rock in the drilling to the more brittle octave of early-morning milk-bottles, wore a nine shoe and a thirteen collar. His first long trousers were let down and taken in. His second taken up and let out. When shaving promised

to become a manly accomplishment, his complexion suddenly clouded, postponing that event until long after it had become a hirsute necessity. When he smiled apoplectically above his first waistcoat and detachable collar, his Adam's apple and his mother's heart fluttered.

"Blow-cat Dennis is going to City College."

"Who's he?"

"A feller."

"Quit crackin' your knuckles."

"He only got seventy in manual training."

"Tell them things to your father, Edwin; I 'ain't got the say-so."

"His father's only a bookkeeper, too, and they live 'way up on a Hundred and Forty-fourth near Third."

"I'm willing to scrimp and save for it, Edwin; but in the end I haven't got the say-so, and you know it."

"The boys that are going to college got to register now for the High School College Society."

"Your father, Edwin, is the one to tell that to."

"Other fellers' mothers put in a word for 'em."

"I do, Edwin; you know I do! It only aggravates him— There's papa now, Edwin, coming in. Help mamma dish up. Put this soup at papa's place and this at yours. There's only two plates left from last night."

In Mrs. Ross's dining-room, a red-glass dome, swung by a chain over the round table, illuminated its white napery and decently flowered china. Beside the window looking out upon a gray-brick wall almost within reach, a canary with a white-fluted

curtain about the cage dozed headless. Beside that window, covered in flowered chintz, a sewing-machine that could collapse to a table; a golden-oak sideboard laid out in pressed glassware. A homely simplicity here saved by chance or chintz from the simply homely.

Mr. Harry Ross drew up immediately beside the spread table, jerking open his newspaper and, head thrown back, read slantingly down at the head-lines.

"Hello, pop!"

"Hello, son!"

"Watch out!"

"Hah—that's the stuff! Don't spill!"

He jammed the newspaper between his and the chair back, shoving in closer to the table. He was blond to ashiness, so that the slicked-back hair might or might not be graying. Pink-shaved, unlined, nose-glasses polished to sparkle, he was ten years his wife's senior and looked those ten years younger. Clerks and clergymen somehow maintain that youth of the flesh, as if life had preserved them in alcohol or shaving-lotion. Mrs. Ross entered then in her crisp but faded house dress, her round, intent face still moistly pink, two steaming dishes held out.

He did not rise, but reached up to kiss her as she passed.

"Burnt your soup a little to-night, mother."

She sat down opposite, breathing deeply outward, spreading her napkin out across her lap.

"It was Edwin coming in from school and getting me worked up with his talk about—about—"

"What?"

"Nothing. Edwin, run out and bring papa the

paprika to take the burnt taste out. I turned all the cuffs on your shirts to-day, Harry."

"Lordy! if you ain't fixing at one thing, you're fixing another."

"Anything new?"

He was well over his soup now, drinking in long draughts from the tip of his spoon.

"News! In A. E. Unger's office, a man don't get his nose far enough up from the ledger to even smell news."

"I see Goldfinch & Goetz failed."

"Could have told 'em they'd go under, trying to put on a spectacular show written in verse. That same show boiled down to good Forty-second Street lingo with some good shapes and a proposition like Alma Zitelle to lift it from poetry to punch has a world of money in it for somebody. A war spectacular show filled with sure-fire patriotic lines, a bunch of show-girl battalions, and a figure like Alma Zitelle's for the Goddess of Liberty—a world of money, I tell you!"

"Honest, Harry?"

"That trench scene they built for that show is as fine a contrivance as I've ever seen of the kind. What did they do? Set it to a lot of music without a hum or a ankle in it. A few classy nurses like the Mercy Militia Sextet, some live, grand-old-flag tunes by Harry Mordelle, and there's a half a million dollars in that show. Unger thinks I'm crazy when I try to get him interested, but I—"

"I got ninety in manual training to-day, pop."

"That's good, son. Little more of that stew, mother?"

"Unger ain't so smart, honey, he can't afford to take a tip off you once in a while: you've proved that to him."

"Yes; but go tell him so."

"He'll live to see the day he's got to give you credit for being the first to see money in 'Pan-America.'"

"Credit? Huh! to hear him tell it, he was born with that idea in his bullet head."

"I'd like to hear him say it to me, if ever I lay eyes on him, that it wasn't you begged him to get into it."

"I'll show 'em some day in that office that I can pick the winners for myself, too, as well as for the other fellow. Believe me, Unger 'ain't raised me to fifty a week for my fancy bookkeeping, and he knows it, and, what's more, he knows I know he knows it."

"The fellers that are goin' to college next term gotta register for the High School College Society, pop—dollar dues."

"Well, you ain't going to college, and that's where you and me save a hundred cents on the dollar. Little more gravy, mother."

The muscles of Edwin's face relaxed, the mouth dropping to a pout, the crude features quivering.

"Aw, pop, a feller nowadays without a college education don't stand a show."

"He don't, don't he? I know one will."

Edwin threw a quivering glance to his mother and gulped through a constricted throat.

"Mother says I—I can go if only you—"

"Your mother 'd say you could have the moon, too, if she had to climb a greased pole to get it.

She'd start weaving door-mats for the Cingalese Hottentots if she thought they needed 'em."

"But, Harry, he—"

"Your mother 'ain't got the bills of this shebang to worry about, and your mother don't mind having a college sissy a-laying around the house to support five years longer. I do."

"It's the free City College, pop."

"You got a better education now than nine boys out of ten. If you ain't man enough to want to get out after four years of high school and hustle for a living, you got to be shown the way out. I started when I was in short pants, and you're no better than your father. Your mother sold notions and axle-grease in an up-State general store up to the day she married. Now cut out the college talk you been springing on me lately. I won't have it—you hear? You're a poor man's son, and the sooner you make up your mind to it the better. Pass the chow-chow, mother."

Nervousness had laid hold of her so that in and out among the dishes her hand trembled.

"You see, Harry, it's the free City College, and—"

"I know that free talk. So was high school free when you talked me into it, but if it ain't one thing it's been another. Cadet uniform, football suit—"

"The child's got talent for invention, Harry; his manual-training teacher told me his air-ship model was—"

"I got ninety in manual training when the other fellers only got seventy."

"I guess you're looking for another case like your

father, sitting penniless around the house, tinkering on inventions up to the day he died."

"Pa never had the business push, Harry. You know yourself his churn was ready for the market before the Peerless beat him in on it."

"Well, your son is going to get the business push trained into him. No boy of mine with a poor daddy eats up four years of his life and my salary training to be a college sissy. That's for the rich men's sons. That's for the Clarence Ungers."

"I'll pay it back some day, pop; I—"

"They all say that."

"If it's the money, Harry, maybe I can—"

"If it didn't cost a cent, I wouldn't have it. Now cut it out—you hear? Quick!"

Edwin Ross pushed back from the table, struggling and choking against impending tears. "Well, then, I—I—"

"And no shuffling of feet, neither!"

"He didn't shuffle, Harry; it's just his feet growing so fast he can't manage them."

"Well, just the samey, I—I ain't going into the theayter business. I—I—"

Mr. Ross flung down his napkin, facing him. "You're going where I put you, young man. You're going to get the right kind of a start that I didn't get in the biggest money-making business in the world."

"I won't. I'll get me a job in an aeroplane-factory."

His father's palm came down with a small crash, shivering the china. "By Gad! you take that impudence out of your voice to me or I'll rawhide it out!"

"Harry!"

"Leave the table!"

"Harry, he's only a child—"

"Go to your room!"

His heavy, unformed lips now trembling frankly against the tears he tried so furiously to resist, Edwin charged with lowered head from the room, sobs escaping in raw gutturals.

Mr. Ross came back to his plate, breathing heavily, fist, with a knife upright in it, coming down again on the table, his mouth open, to facilitate labored breathing.

"By Heaven! I'll cowhide that boy to his senses! I've never laid hand on him yet, but he ain't too old. I'll get him down to common sense, if I got to break a rod over him."

Handkerchief against trembling lips, Mrs. Ross looked after the vanished form, eyes brimming.

"Harry, you—you're so rough with him."

"I'll be rougher yet before I'm through."

"He's only a—"

"He's rewarding the way you scrimped to pay his expenses for nonsense clubs and societies by asking you to do it another four years. You're getting your thanks now. College! Well, not if the court knows it—"

"He's got talent, Harry; his teacher says he—"

"So'd your father have talent."

"If pa hadn't lost his eye in the Civil War—"

"I'm going to put my son's talent where I can see a future for it."

"He's ambitious, Harry."

"So'm I—to see my son trained to be something

besides a looney inventor like his grandfather before him."

"It's all I want in life, Harry, to see my two boys of you happy."

"It's your woman-ideas I got to blame for this. I want you to stop, Millie, putting rich man's ideas in his head. You hear? I won't stand for it."

"Harry, if—if it's the money, maybe I could manage—"

"Yes—and scrimp and save and scrooge along without a laundress another four years, and do his washing and—"

"I—could fix the money part, Harry—easy."

He regarded her with his jaw dropped in the act of chewing.

"By Gad! where do you plant it?"

"It—it's the way I scrimp, Harry. Another woman would spend it on clothes or—a servant—or matinées. It ain't hard for a home body like me to save, Harry."

He reached across the table for her wrist.

"Poor little soul," he said, "you don't see daylight."

"Let him go, Harry, if—if he wants it. I can manage the money."

His scowl returned, darkening him.

"No. A. E. Unger never seen the inside of a high school, much less a college, and I guess he's made as good a pile as most. I've worked for the butcher and the landlord all my life, and now I ain't going to begin being a slave to my boy. There's been two or three times in my life where, for want of a few dirty dollars to make a right start, I'd be a

rich man to-day. My boy's going to get that right start."

"But, Harry, college will—"

"I seen money in 'Pan-America' long before Unger ever dreamed of producing it. I sicked him onto 'The Official Chaperon' when every manager in town had turned it down. I went down and seen 'em doing 'The White Elephant' in a Yiddish theater and wired Unger out in Chicago to come back and grab it for Broadway. Where's it got me? Nowhere. Because I whiled away the best fifteen years of my life in an up-State burg, and then, when I came down here too late in life, got in the rut of a salaried man. Well, where it 'ain't got me it's going to get my son. I'm missing a chance to-day that, mark my word, would make me a rich man but for want of a few—"

"Harry, you mean that?"

"My hunch never fails me."

She was leaning across the table, her hands clasping its edge, her small, plump face even pinker.

He threw out his legs beneath the table and sat back, hands deep in pockets, and a toothpick hanging limp from between lips that were sagging.

"Gad! if I had my life to live over again as a salaried man, I'd—I'd hang myself first! The way to start a boy to a million dollars in this business is to start him young in the producing-end of a strong firm."

"You—got faith in this Goldfinch & Goetz failure like you had in 'Pan-America' and 'The Chaperon,' Harry?"

"I said it five years ago and it come to pass. I

say it now. For want of a few dirty dollars I'm a poor man till I die."

"How—many dollars, Harry?"

"Don't make me say it, Millie—it makes me sick to my stummick. Three thousand dollars would buy the whole spectacle to save it from the storehouse. I tried Charley Ryan—he wouldn't risk a ten-spot on a failure."

"Harry, I—oh, Harry—"

"Why, mother, what's the matter? You been overworking again, ironing my shirts and collars when they ought to go to the laundry? You—"

"Harry, what would you say if—if I was to tell you something?"

"What is it, mother? You better get Annie in on Mondays. We 'ain't got any more to show without her than with her."

"Harry, we—have!"

"Well, you just had an instance of the thanks you get."

"Harry, what—what would you say if I could let you have nearly all of that three thousand?"

He regarded her above the flare of a match to his cigar-end.

"Huh?"

"If I could let you have twenty-six hundred seventeen dollars and about fifty cents of it?"

He sat well up, the light reflecting in points off his polished glasses.

"Mother, you're joking!"

Her hands were out across the table now, almost reaching his, her face close and screwed under the lights.

"When—when you lost out that time five years ago on 'Pan-America' and I seen how Unger made a fortune out of it, I says to myself, 'It can never happen again.' You remember the next January when you got your raise to fifty and I wouldn't move out of this flat, and instead gave up having Annie in, that was what I had in my head, Harry. It wasn't alone for sending Edwin to high school; it was for—my other boy, too, Harry, so it couldn't happen again."

"Millie, you mean—"

"You 'ain't got much idea, Harry, of what I been doing. You don't know it, honey, but, honest, I 'ain't bought a stitch of new clothes for five years. You know I 'ain't, somehow—made friends for myself since we moved here."

"It's the hard-shell town of the world!"

"You 'ain't had time, Harry, to ask yourself what becomes of the house allowance, with me stinting so. Why, I—I won't spend car fare, Harry, since 'Pan-America,' if I can help it. This meal I served up here to-night, with all the high cost of living, didn't cost us two-thirds what it might if—if I didn't have it all figured down. Where do you think your laundry-money that I've been saving goes, Harry? The marmalade-money I made the last two Christmases? The velvet muff I made myself out of the fur-money you give me? It's all in the Farmers' Trust, Harry. With the two hundred and ten I had to start with five years ago, it's twenty-six hundred and seventeen dollars and fifty cents now. I've been saving it for this kind of a minute, Harry. When it got three thousand, I was going to tell you,

anyways. Is that enough, Harry, to do the Goldfinch-Goetz spectacle on your own hook? Is it, Harry?"

He regarded her in a heavy-jawed kind of stupefaction.

"Woman alive!" he said. "Great Heavens, woman alive!"

"It's in the bank, waiting, Harry—all for you."

"Why, Millie, I—I don't know what to say."

"I want you to have it, Harry. It's yours. Out of your pocket, back into it. You got capital to start with now."

"I— Why, I can't take that money, Millie, from you!"

"From your wife? When she stinted and scrimped and saved on shoe-leather for the happiness of it?"

"Why, this is no sure thing I got on the brain."

"Nothing is."

"I got nothing but my own judgment to rely on."

"You been right three times, Harry."

"There's not as big a gamble in the world as the show business. I can't take your savings, mother."

"Harry, if—if you don't, I'll tear it up. It's what I've worked for. I'm too tired, Harry, to stand much. If you don't take it, I— I'm too tired, Harry, to stand it."

"But, mother—"

"I couldn't stand it, I tell you," she said, the tears now bursting and flowing down over her cheeks.

"Why, Millie, you mustn't cry! I 'ain't seen you cry in years. Millie! my God! I can't get my thoughts together! Me to own a show after all these years; me to—"

"Don't you think it means something to me, too, Harry?"

"I can't lose, Millie. Even if this country gets drawn into the war, there's a mint of money in that show as I see it. It 'll help the people. The people of this country need to have their patriotism tickled."

"All my life, Harry, I've wanted a gold-mesh bag with a row of sapphires and diamonds across the top—"

"I'm going to make it the kind of show that 'Dixie' was a song—"

"And a gold-colored bird-of-paradise for a black-velvet hat, all my life, Harry—"

"With Alma Zitelle in the part—"

"Is it her picture I found in your drawer the other day, Harry, cut out from a Sunday newspaper?"

"One and the same. I been watching her. There's a world of money in that woman, whoever she is. She's eccentric and they make her play straight, but if I could get hold of her— My God! Millie, I —I can't believe things!"

She rose, coming round to lay her arms across his shoulders.

"We'll be rich, maybe, Harry—"

"I've picked the winners for the other fellows every time, Mil."

"Anyhow, it's worth the gamble, Harry."

"I got a nose for what the people want. I've never been able to prove it from a high stool, but I'll show 'em now—by God! I'll show 'em now!" He sprang up, pulling the white table-cloth awry and folding her into his embrace. "I'll show 'em."

She leaned from him, her two hands against his chest, head thrown back and eyes up to him.

"We—can educate our boy, then, Harry, like—like a rich man's son."

"We ain't rich yet."

"Promise me, Harry, if we are—promise me that, Harry. It's the only promise I ask out of it. Whatever comes, if we win or lose, our boy can have college if he wants."

He held her close, his head up and gazing beyond her.

"With a rich daddy my boy can go to college like the best of 'em."

"Promise me that, Harry."

"I promise, Millie."

He released her then, feeling for an envelope in an inner pocket, and, standing there above the disarrayed dinner-table, executed some rapid figures across the back of it.

She stood for a moment regarding him, hands pressed against the sting of her cheeks, tears flowing down over her smile. Then she took up the plate of cloying fritters and tiptoed out, opening softly the door to a slit of a room across the hall. In the patch of light let in by that opened door, drawn up before a small table, face toward her ravaged with recent tears, and lips almost quivering, her son lay in the ready kind of slumber youth can bring to any woe. She tiptoed up beside him, placing the plate of fritters back on a pile of books, let her hands run lightly over his hair, kissed him on each swollen lid.

"My son! My little boy! My little boy!"

Where Broadway leaves off its roof-follies and its water-dancing, its eighty-odd theaters and its very odd Hawaiian cabarets, upper Broadway, widening slightly, takes up its macadamized rush through the city in block-square apartment-houses, which rise off plate-glass foundations of the de-luxe greengrocer shops, the not-so-green beauty-parlors, and the dyeing-and-cleaning, automobile-supplies, and confectionery establishments of middle New York.

In a no-children-allowed, swimming-pool, electric-laundry, roof-garden, dogs'-playground, cold-storage apartment most recently erected on a block-square tract of upper Broadway, belonging to and named after the youngest scion of an ancestor whose cow-patches had turned to kingdoms, the fifteenth layer of this gigantic honeycomb overlooked from its seventeen outside windows the great Babylonian valley of the city, the wide blade of the river shining and curving slightly like an Arabian dagger, and the embankment of New Jersey's Palisades piled against the sky with the effect of angry horizon.

Nights, viewed from one of the seventeen windows, it was as if the river flowed under a sullen sheath which undulated to its curves. On clear days it threw off light like parrying steel in sunshine.

Were days when, gazing out toward it, Mrs. Ross, whose heart was like a slow ache of ever-widening area, could almost feel its laving quality and, after the passage of a tug- or pleasure-boat, the soothing folding of the water down over and upon itself. Often, with the sun setting pink and whole above the Palisades, the very copper glow which was struck

off the water would beat against her own west windows, and, as if smarting under the brilliance, tears would come, sometimes staggering and staggering down, long after the glow was cold. With such a sunset already waned, and the valley of unrest fifteen stories below popping out into electric signs and the red danger-lanterns of streets constantly in the remaking, Mrs. Harry Ross, from the corner window of her seventeen, looked down on it from under lids that were rimmed in red.

Beneath the swirl of a gown that lay in an iridescent avalanche of sequins about her feet, her foot, tilted to an unbelievable hypothenuse off a cloth-of-silver heel, beat a small and twinkling tattoo, her fingers tattooing, too, along the chair-sides.

How insidiously do the years nibble in! how pussy-footed and how cocksure the crow's-feet! One morning, and the first gray hair, which has been turning from the cradle, arrives. Another, the mirror shows back a sag beneath the eyes. That sag had come now to Mrs. Ross, giving her eye-sockets a look of unconquerable weariness. The streak of quicksilver had come, too, but more successfully combated. The head lying back against the brocade chair was guilty of new gleams. Brass, with a greenish alloy. Sitting there with the look of unshed tears seeming to form a film over her gaze, it was as if the dusk, flowing into a silence that was solemnly shaped to receive it, folded her in, more and more obscuring her.

A door opened at the far end of the room, letting in a patch of hall light and a dark figure coming into silhouette against it.

"You there?"

She sprang up.

"Yes, Harry—yes."

"Good Lord! sitting in the dark again!" He turned a wall key, three pink-shaded lamps, a cluster of pink-glass grapes, and a center-bowl of alabaster flashing up the familiar spectacle of Louis Fourteenth's and the interior decorator's turpitude; a deep-pink brocade divan backed up by a Circassian-walnut table with curly legs; a maze of smaller tables; a marble Psyche holding out the cluster of pink grapes; a gilt grand piano, festooned in rosebuds. Around through these Mr. Ross walked quickly, winding his hands, rubbing them.

"Well, here I am!"

"Had your supper—dinner, Harry?"

"No. What's the idea calling me off when I got a business dinner on hand? What's the hurry call this time? I got to get back to it."

She clasped her hands to her bare throat, swallowing with effort.

"I—Harry—I—"

"You got to stop this kind of thing, Millie, getting nervous spells like all the other women do the minute they get ten cents in their pocket. I 'ain't got the time for it—that's all there is to it."

"I can't help it, Harry. I think I must be going crazy. I can't stop myself. All of a sudden everything comes over me. I think I must be going crazy."

Her voice jerked up to an off pitch, and he flung himself down on the deep-cushioned couch, his stiff expanse of dress shirt bulging and straining at the studs. A bit redder and stouter, too, he was con-

stantly rearing his chin away from the chafing edge of his collar.

"O Lord!" he said. "I guess I'm let in for some cutting-up again! Well, fire away and have it over with! What's eating you this time?"

She was quivering so against sobs that her lips were drawn in against her teeth by the great draught of her breathing.

"I can't stand it, Harry. I'm going crazy. I got to get relief. It's killing me—the lonesomeness—the waiting. I can't stand no more."

He sat looking at a wreath of roses in the light carpet, lips compressed, beating with fist into palm.

"Gad! I dunno! I give up. You're too much for me, woman."

"I can't go on this way—the suspense—can't—can't."

"I don't know what you want. God knows I give up! Thirty-eight-hundred-dollar-a-year apartment—more spending-money in a week than you can spend in a month. Clothes. Jewelry. Your son one of the high-fliers at college—his automobile—your automobile. Passes to every show in town. Gad! I can't help it if you turn it all down and sit up here moping and making it hot for me every time I put my foot in the place. I don't know what you want; you're one too many for me."

"I can't stand—"

"All of a sudden, out of a clear sky, she sends for me to come home. Second time in two weeks. No wonder, with your long face, your son lives mostly up at the college. I 'ain't got enough on my mind yet with the 'Manhattan Revue' opening to-morrow

night. You got it too good, if you want to know it. That's what ails women when they get to cutting up like this."

She was clasping and unclasping her hands, swaying, her eyes closed.

"I wisht to God we was back in our little flat on a Hundred and Thirty-seventh Street. We was happy then. It's your success has lost you for me. I ought to known it, but—I—I wanted things so for you and the boy. It's your success has lost you for me. Back there, not a supper we didn't eat together like clockwork, not a night we didn't take a walk or—"

"There you go again! I tell you, Millie, you're going to nag me with that once too often. Then ain't now. What you homesick for? Your poor-as-a-church-mouse days? I been pretty patient these last two years, feeling like a funeral every time I put my foot in the front door—"

"It ain't often you put it in."

"But, mark my word, you're going to nag me once too often!"

"O God! Harry, I try to keep in! I know how wild it makes you—how busy you are, but—"

"A man that's give to a woman heaven on earth like I have you! A man that started three years ago on nothing but nerve and a few dollars, and now stands on two feet, one of the biggest spectacle-producers in the business! By Gad! you're so darn lucky it's made a loon out of you! Get out more. Show yourself a good time. You got the means and the time. Ain't there no way to satisfy you?"

"I can't do things alone all the time, Harry. I—

I'm funny that way. I ain't a woman like that, a new-fangled one that can do things without her husband. It's the nights that kill me—the nights. The—all nights sitting here alone—waiting."

"If you 'ain't learned the demands of my business by now, I'm not going over them again."

"Yes; but not all—"

"You ought to have some men to deal with. I'd like to see Mrs. Unger try to dictate to him how to run his business."

"You've left me behind, Harry. I—try to keep up, but—I can't. I ain't the woman to naturally paint my hair this way. It's my trying to keep up, Harry, with you and—and—Edwin. These clothes—I ain't right in 'em, Harry; I know that. That's why I can't stand it. The suspense. The waiting up nights. I tell you I'm going crazy. Crazy with knowing I'm left behind."

"I never told you to paint up your hair like a freak."

"I thought, Harry—the color—like hers—it might make me seem younger—"

"You thought! You're always thinking."

She stood behind him now over the couch, her hand yearning toward but not touching him.

"O God! Harry, ain't there no way I can please you no more—no way?"

"You can please me by acting like a human being and not getting me home on wild-goose chases like this."

"But I can't stand it, Harry! The quiet. Nobody to do for. You always gone. Edwin. The way the servants—laugh. I ain't smart enough,

like some women. I got to show it—that my heart's breaking."

"Go to matinées; go—"

"Tell me how to make myself like Alma Zitelle to you, Harry. For God's sake, tell me!"

He looked away from her, the red rising up above the rear of his collar.

"You're going to drive me crazy desperate, too, some day, on that jealousy stuff. I'm trying to do the right thing by you and hold myself in, but—there's limits."

"Harry, it—ain't jealousy. I could stand anything if I only knew. If you'd only come out with it. Not keep me sitting here night after night, when I know you—you're with her. It's the suspense, Harry, as much as anything is killing me. I could stand it, maybe, if I only knew. If I only knew!"

He sprang up, wheeling to face her across the couch.

"You mean that?"

"Harry!"

"Well, then, since you're the one wants it, since you're forcing me to it—I'll end your suspense, Millie. Yes. Let me go, Millie. There's no use trying to keep life in something that's dead. Let me go."

She stood looking at him, cheeks cased in palms, and her sagging eye-sockets seeming to darken, even as she stared.

"You—her—"

"It happens every day, Millie. Man and woman grow apart, that's all. Your own son is man enough

to understand that. Nobody to blame. Just happens."

"Harry—you mean—"

"Aw, now, Millie, it's no easier for me to say than for you to listen. I'd sooner cut off my right hand than put it up to you. Been putting it off all these months. If you hadn't nagged—led up to it, I'd have stuck it out somehow and made things miserable for both of us. It's just as well you brought it up. I— Life's life, Millie, and what you going to do about it?"

A sound escaped her like the rising moan of a gale up a flue; then she sat down against trembling that seized her and sent ripples along the iridescent sequins.

"Harry—Alma Zitelle—you mean—Harry?"

"Now what's the use going into all that, Millie? What's the difference who I mean? It's happened."

"Harry, she—she's a common woman."

"We won't discuss that."

"She'll climb on you to what she wants higher up still. She won't bring you nothing but misery, Harry. I know what I'm saying; she'll—"

"You're talking about something you know nothing about—you—"

"I do. I do. You're hypnotized, Harry. It's her looks. Her dressing like a snake. Her hair. I can get mine fixed redder 'n hers, Harry. It takes a little time. Mine's only started to turn, Harry, is why it don't look right yet to you. This dress, it's from her own dressmaker. Harry—I promise you I can make myself like—her—I promise you, Harry—"

"For God's sake, Millie, don't talk like—that! It's awful! What's those things got to do with it? It's—awful!"

"They have, Harry. They have, only a man don't know it. She's a bad woman, Harry—she's got you fascinated with the way she dresses and does—"

"We won't go into that."

"We will. We will. I got the right. I don't have to let you go if I don't want to. I'm the mother of your son. I'm the wife that was good enough for you in the days when you needed her. I—"

"You can't throw that up to me, Millie. I've squared that debt."

"She'll throw you over, Harry, when I'll stand by you to the crack of doom. Take my word for it, Harry. O God! Harry, please take my word for it!"

She closed her streaming eyes, clutching at his sleeve in a state beyond her control. "Won't you please? Please!"

He toed the carpet.

"I—I'd sooner be hit in the face, Millie, than—have this happen. Swear I would! But you see for yourself we—we can't go on this way."

She sat for a moment, her stare widening above the palm clapped tightly against her mouth.

"Then you mean, Harry, you want—you want a—a—"

"Now, now, Millie, try to keep hold of yourself. You're a sensible woman. You know I'll do the right thing by you to any amount. You'll have the boy till he's of age, and after that, too, just as much

as you want him. He'll live right here in the flat with you. Money's no object, the way I'm going to fix things. Why, Millie, compared to how things are now—you're going to be a hundred per cent. better off—without me."

She fell to rocking herself in the straight chair.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

"Now, Millie, don't take it that way. I know that nine men out of ten would call me crazy to—to let go of a woman like you. But what's the use trying to keep life in something that's dead? It's because you're too good for me, Millie. I know that. You know that it's not because I think any less of you, or that I've forgot it was you give me my start. I'd pay you back ten times more if I could. I'm going to settle on you and the boy so that you're fixed for life. When he's of age, he comes into the firm half-interest. There won't even be no publicity, the way I'm going to fix things. Money talks, Millie. You'll get your decree without having to show your face to the public."

"O God—he's got it all fixed—he's talked it all over with her! She—"

"You—you wouldn't want to force something between you and me, Millie; that—that's just played out—"

"I done it myself. I couldn't let well enough alone. I was ambitious for 'em. I dug my own grave. I done it myself. Done it myself!"

"Now, Millie, you mustn't look at things that way. Why, you're the kind of a little woman all you got to have is something to mother over. I'm going to see to it that the boy is right here at home

with you all the time. He can give up those rooms at the college—you got as fine a son as there is in the country, Millie—I'm going to see to it that he is right here at home with you—"

"O God—my boy—my little boy—my little boy!"

"The days are over, Millie, when this kind of thing makes any difference. If it was—the mother—it might be different, but where the father is—to blame—it don't matter with the boy. Anyways, he's nearly of age. I tell you, Millie, if you'll just look at this thing sensible—"

"I— Let me think, let—me—think."

Her tears had quieted now to little dry moans that came with regularity. She was still swaying in her chair, eyes closed.

"You'll get your decree, Millie, without—"

"Don't talk," she said, a frown lowering over her closed eyes and pressing two fingers against each temple. "Don't talk."

He walked to the window in a state of great perturbation, stood pulling inward his lips and staring down into the now brilliantly lighted flow of Broadway. Turned into the room with short, hasty strides, then back again. Came to confront her.

"Aw, now, Millie—Millie—" Stood regarding her, chewing backward and forward along his fingertips. "You—you see for yourself, Millie, what's dead can't be made alive—now, can it?"

She nodded, acquiescing, her lips bitterly wry.

"My lawyer, Millie, he'll fix it, alimony and all, so you won't—"

"O God!"

"Suppose I just slip away easy, Millie, and let

him fix up things so it 'll be easiest for us both. Send the boy down to see me to-morrow. He's old enough and got enough sense to have seen things coming. He knows. Suppose—I just slip out easy, Millie, for—for—both of us. Huh, Millie?"

She nodded again, her lips pressed back against outburst.

"If ever there was a good little woman, Millie, and one that deserves better than me, it's—"

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't—don't—don't!"

"I—"

"Go—quick—now!"

He hesitated, stood regarding her there in the chair, eyes squeezed closed like Iphigenia praying for death when exiled in Tauris.

"Millie—I—"

"Go!" she cried, the wail clinging to her lips.

He felt round for his hat, his gaze obscured behind the shining glasses, tiptoed out round the archipelago of too much furniture, groped for the door-handle, turning it noiselessly, and stood for the instant looking back at her bathed in the rosy light and seated upright like a sleeping Ariadne; opened the door to a slit that closed silently after him.

She sat thus for three hours after, the wail still uppermost on the silence.

At ten o'clock, with a gust that swayed the heavy drapes, her son burst in upon the room, his stride kicking the door before he opened it. Six feet in his gymnasium shoes, and with a ripple of muscle beneath the well-fitting, well-advertised Campus Coat for College Men, he had emerged from the three years into man's complete estate, which, at

nineteen, is that patch of territory at youth's feet known as "the world." Gray-eyed, his dark lashes long enough to threaten to curl, the lean line of his jaw squaring after the manner of America's fondest version of her manhood, he was already in danger of fond illusions and fond mammas.

"Hello, mother!" he said, striding quickly through the chairs and over to where she sat.

"Edwin!"

"Thought I'd sleep home to-night, mother."

He kissed her lightly, perking up her shoulder-butterflies of green sequins, and standing off to observe.

"Got to hand it to my little mother for quiet and sumptuous el-e-gance! Some classy spangy-wangles!" He ran his hand against the lay of the sequins, absorbed in a conscious kind of gaiety.

She moistened her lips, trying to smile.

"Oh, boy," she said—"Edwin!"—holding to his forearm with fingers that tightened into it.

"Mother," he said, pulling at his coat lapels with a squaring of shoulders, "you—you going to be a dead-game little sport?"

She was looking ahead now, abstraction growing in her white face.

"Huh?"

He fell into short strides up and down the length of the couch-front.

"I—I guess I might have mentioned it before, mother, but—but—oh, hang!—when a fellow's a senior it—it's all he can do to get home once in a while and—and—what's the use talking about a thing anyway before it breaks right, and—well,

everybody knows it's up to us college fellows—college men—to lead the others and show our country what we're made of now that she needs us—eh, little dressed-up mother?"

She looked up at him with the tremulous smile still trying to break through.

"My boy can mix with the best of 'em."

"That's not what I mean, mother."

"You got to be twice to me what you been, darling—twice to me. Listen, darling. I— Oh, my God!"

She was beating softly against his hand held in hers, her voice rising again, and her tears.

"Listen, darling—"

"Now, mother, don't go into a spell. The war is going to help you out on these lonesome fits, mother. Like Slawson put it to-day in Integral Calculus Four, war reduces the personal equation to its lowest terms—it's a matter of—"

"I need you now, Edwin—O God! how I need you! There never was a minute in all these months since you've grown to understand how—it is between your father and me that I needed you so much—"

"Mother, you mustn't make it harder for me to —tell you what I—"

"I think maybe something has happened to me, Edwin. I can feel myself breathe all over—it's like I'm outside of myself somewhere—"

"It's nervousness, mother. You ought to get out more. I'm going to get you some war-work to do, mother, that 'll make you forget yourself. Service is what counts these days!"

"Edwin, it's come—he's leaving me—it—"

"Speaking of service, I—I guess I might have mentioned it before, mother, but—but—when war was declared the other day, a—a bunch of us fellows volunteered for—for the university unit to France, and—well, I'm accepted, mother—to go. The lists went up to-night. I'm one of the twenty picked fellows."

"France?"

"We sail for Bordeaux for ambulance service the twentieth, mother. I was the fourth accepted with my qualifications—driving my own car and—and physical fitness. I'm going to France, mother, among the first to do my bit. I know a fellow got over there before we were in the war and worked himself into the air-fleet. That's what I want, mother, air service! They're giving us fellows credit for our senior year just the same. Bob Vandaventer and Clarence Unger and some of the fellows like that are in the crowd. Are you a dead-game sport, little mother, and not going to make a fuss—"

"I—don't know. What—is—it— I—"

"Your son at the front, mother, helping to make the world a safer place for democracy. Does a little mother with something like that to bank on have time to be miserable over family rows? You're going to knit while I'm gone. The busiest little mother a fellow ever had, doing her bit for her country! There's signs up all over the girls' campus: 'A million soldiers "out there" are needing wool jackets and chest-protectors. How many will you take care of?' You're going to be the busiest little mother a fellow ever had. You're going to stop making a

fuss over me and begin to make a fuss over your country. We're going into service, mother!"

"Don't leave me, Edwin! Baby darling, don't leave me! I'm alone! I'm afraid."

"There, there, little mother," he said, patting at her and blinking, "I— Why—why, there's men come back from every war, and plenty of them. Good Lord! just because a fellow goes to the front, he—"

"I got nothing left. Everything I've worked for has slipped through my life like sand through a sieve. My hands are empty. I've lost your father on the success I slaved for. I'm losing my boy on the fine ideas and college education I've slaved for. I— Don't leave me, Edwin. I'm afraid— Don't—"

"Mother—I— Don't be cut up about it. I—"

"Why should I give to this war? I ain't a fine woman with the fine ideas you learn at college. I ask so little of life—just some one who needs me, some one to do for. I 'ain't got any fine ideas about a son at war. Why should I give to what they're fighting for on the other side of the ocean? Don't ask me to give up my boy to what they're fighting for in a country I've never seen—my little boy I raised—my all I've got—my life! No! No!"

"It's the women like you, mother—with guts—with grit—that send their sons to war."

"I 'ain't got grit!"

"You're going to have your hands so full, little mother, taking care of the Army and Navy, keeping their feet dry and their chests warm, that before you know it you'll be down at the pier some fine day watching us fellows come home from victory."

"No—no—no!"

"You're going to coddle the whole fighting front, making 'em sweaters and aviation-sets out of a whole ton of wool I'm going to lay in the house for you. Time's going to fly for my little mother."

"I'll kill myself first!"

"You wouldn't have me a quitter, little mother. You wouldn't have the other fellows in my crowd at college go out and do what I haven't got the guts to do. You want me to hold up my head with the best of 'em."

"I don't want nothing but my boy! I—"

"Us college men got to be the first to show that the fighting backbone of the country is where it belongs. If us fellows with education don't set the example, what can we expect of the other fellows? Don't ask me to be a quitter, mother. I couldn't! I wouldn't! My country needs us, mother—you and me—"

"Edwin! Edwin!"

"Attention, little mother—stand!"

She lay back her head, laughing, crying, sobbing, choking.

"O God—take him and bring him back—to me!"

On a day when sky and water were so identically blue that they met in perfect horizon, the S. S. *Rowena*, sleek-flanked, mounted fore and aft with a pair of black guns that lifted snouts slightly to the impeccable blue, slipped quietly and without even a newspaper sailing-announcement into a frivolous midstream that kicked up little lace-edged wavelets, undulating flounces of them. A blur of faces

rose above deck-rails, faces that, looking back, receded finally. The last flag and the last kerchief became vapor. Against the pier-edge, frantically, even perilously forward, her small flag thrust desperately beyond the rail, Mrs. Ross, who had lost a saving sense of time and place, leaned after that ship receding in majesty, long after it had curved from view.

The crowd, not a dry-eyed one, women in spite of themselves with lips whitening, men grim with pride and an innermost bleeding, sagged suddenly, thinning and trickling back into the great, impersonal maw of the city. Apart from the rush of the exodus, a youth remained at the rail, gazing out and quivering for the smell of war. Finally, he too, turned back reluctantly.

Now only Mrs. Ross. An hour she stood there, a solitary figure at the rail, holding to her large black hat, her skirts whipped to her body and snapping forward in the breeze. The sun struck off points from the water, animating it with a jewel-dance. It found out in a flash the diamond-and-sapphire top to her gold-mesh hand-bag, hoppity-skippiting from facet to facet.

"My boy—my little boy!"

A pair of dock-hands, wiping their hands on cotton-waste, came after a while to the door of the pier-house to observe and comment. Conscious of that observation, she moved then through the great dank sheds in and among the bales and boxes, down a flight of stairs and out to the cobbled street. Her motor-car, the last at the entrance, stood off at a slant, the chauffeur lopping slightly and dozing, his

face scarcely above the steering-wheel. She passed him with unnecessary stealth, her heels occasionally wedging between the cobbles and jerking her up. Two hours she walked thus, invariably next to the water's edge or in the first street running parallel to it. Truck-drivers gazed at and sang after her. Deck- and dock-hands, stretched out in the first sun of spring, opened their eyes to her passing, often staring after her under lazy lids. Behind a drawn veil her lips were moving, but inaudibly now. Motor-trucks, blocks of them, painted the gray of war, stood waiting shipment, engines ready to throb into no telling what mire. Once a van of knitted stuffs, always the gray, corded and bound into bales, rumbled by, close enough to graze and send her stumbling back. She stood for a moment watching it lumber up alongside a dock.

It was dusk when she emerged from the rather sinister end of West Street into Battery Park, receding in a gracious new-green curve from the water. Tier after tier of lights had begun to prick out in the back-drop of skyscraping office-buildings. The little park, after the six-o'clock stampede, settled back into a sort of lamplit quiet, dark figures, the dregs of a city day, here and there on its benches. The back-drop of office-lights began to blink out then, all except the tallest tower in the world, rising in the glory of its own spotlight into a rococo pinnacle of man's accomplishment.

Strolling the edge of that park so close to the water that she could hear it seethe in the receding, a policeman finally took to following Mrs. Ross, his measured tread behind hers, his night-stick rapping out every

so often. She found out a bench then, and never out of his view, sat looking out across the infinitude of blackness to where the bay so casually meets the sea. Night-damp had set her shivering, the plumage of her hat, the ferny feathers of the bird-of-paradise, drooping almost grotesquely over the brim.

A small detachment of Boy Scouts, sturdy with an enormous sense of uniform and valor, marched through the asphalt alleys of the park with trained, small-footed, regimental precision—small boys with clean, lifted faces. A fife and drum came up the road.

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

High over the water a light had come out—Liberty's high-flung torch. Watching it, and quickened by the fife and drum to an erect sitting posture, Mrs. Ross slid forward on her bench, lips opening. The policeman standing off, rapped twice, and when she rose, almost running toward the lights of the Elevated station, followed.

Within her apartment on upper Broadway, not even a hall light burned when she let herself in with her key. At the remote end of the aisle of blackness a slit of yellow showed beneath the door, behind it the babble of servants' voices.

She entered with a stealth that was well under cover of those voices, groping into the first door at her right, feeling round for the wall key, switching the old-rose-and-gold room into immediate light. Stood for a moment, her plumage drooping damply to her very shoulders, blue foulard dress snagged in two places, her gold-mesh bag with the sapphire-and-diamond top hanging low from the crook of

her little finger. A clock ticked with almost an echo into the rather vast silence.

She entered finally, sidling in among the chairs.

A great mound of gray yarn, uncut skein after uncut skein of it, rose off the brocade divan, more of them piled in systematic pyramids on three chairs. She dropped at sight of it to the floor beside the couch, burying her face in its fluff, grasping it in handfuls, writhing into it. Surges of merciful sobs came sweeping through and through her.

After a while, with a pair of long amber-colored needles, she fell to knitting with a fast, even furious ambidexterity, her mouth pursing up with a driving intensity, her boring gaze so concentrated on the thing in hand that her eyes seemed to cross.

Dawn broke upon her there, her hat still cockily awry, tears dried in a vitrified gleaming down her cheeks. Beneath her flying fingers, a sleeveless waistcoat was taking shape, a soldier's inner jacket against the dam of trenches. At sunup it lay completed, spread out as if the first of a pile. The first noises of the city began to rise remotely. A bell pealed off somewhere. Day began to raise its conglomerate voice. On her knees beside the couch there, the second waistcoat was already taking shape beneath the cocksure needles.

The old pinkly moist look had come out in her face.

One million boys "out there" were needing chest-protectors!

III

ICE-WATER, PL—!

WHEN the two sides of every story are told, Henry VIII. may establish an alibi or two, Shylock and the public-school system meet over and melt that too, too solid pound of flesh, and Xantippe, herself the sturdier man than Socrates, give ready lie to what is called the shrew in her. Landladies, whole black-bombazine generations of them—oh, so long unheard!—may rise in one Indictment of the Boarder: The scarred bureau-front and match-scratched wall-paper; the empty trunk nailed to the floor in security for the unpaid bill; cigarette-burnt sheets and the terror of sudden fire; the silent new-comer in the third floor back hustled out one night in handcuffs; the day-long sobs of the blond girl so suddenly terrified of life-about-to-be and wringing her ringless hands in the fourth-floor hall-room; the smell of escaping gas and the tightly packed keyhole; the unsuspected flutes that lurk in boarders' trunks; towels, that querulous and endless pæan of the lodger; the high cost of liver and dried peaches, of canned corn and round steak!

Tired bombazine procession, wrapped in the greasy odors of years of carpet-sweeping and emptying slops,

airing the gassy slit of room after the coroner; and padding from floor to floor on a mission of towels and towels and towels!

Sometimes climbing from floor to floor, a still warm supply of them looped over one arm, Mrs. Kaufman, who wore bombazine, but unspotted and with crisp net frills at the throat, and upon whose soft-looking face the years had written their chirography in invisible ink, would sit suddenly, there in the narrow gloom of her halls, head against the balustrade. Oftener than not the Katz boy from the third floor front would come lickety-clapping down the stairs and past her, jumping the last four steps of each flight.

"Irving, quit your noise in the hall."

"Aw!"

"Ain't you ashamed, a big boy like you, and Mrs. Suss with her neuralgia?"

"Aw!"—the slam of a door clipping off this insolence.

After a while she would resume her climb.

And yet in Mrs. Kaufman's private boarding-house in West Eighty-ninth Street, one of a breast-work of brownstone fronts, lined up stoop for stoop, story for story, and ash-can for ash-can, there were few enough greasy odors except upon the weekly occasion of Monday's boiled dinner; and, whatever the status of liver and dried peaches, canned corn and round steak, her menus remained static—so static that in the gas-lighted basement dining-room and at a remote end of the long, well-surrounded table Mrs. Katz, with her napkin tucked well under her third chin, turned *sotto* from the protruding hus-

band at her right to her left neighbor, shielding her remark with her hand.

"Am I right, Mrs. Finshriber? I just said to my husband in the five years we been here she should just give us once a change from Friday-night lamb and noodles."

"Say, you should complain yet! With me it's six and a half years day after to-morrow, Easter Day, since I asked myself that question first."

"Even my Irving says to me to-night up in the room, jumping up and down on the hearth like he had four legs—"

"I heard him, Mrs. Katz, on my ceiling like he had eight legs."

"'Mamma,' he says, 'guess why I feel like saying "Baa."'"

"Saying what?"

"Sheep talk, Mrs. Finshriber. B-a-a, like a sheep goes."

"Oh!"

"'Cause I got so many Friday nights' lamb in me, mamma,' he said. Quick like a flash that child is."

Mrs. Finshriber dipped her head and her glance, all her drooping features pulled even farther down at their corners. "I ain't the one to complain, Mrs. Katz, and I always say, when you come right down to it maybe Mrs. Kaufman's house is as good as the next one, but—"

"I wish, though, Mrs. Finshriber, you would hear what Mrs. Spritz says at her boarding-house they get for breakfast: fried—"

"You can imagine, Mrs. Katz, since my poor

husband's death, how much appetite I got left; but I say, Mrs. Katz, just for the principle of the thing, it would not hurt once Mrs. Kaufman should give somebody else besides her own daughter and Vetsburg always the white meat from everything, ain't it?"

"It's a shame before the boarders! She knows, Mrs. Finshriber, how my husband likes breast from the chicken. You think once he gets it? No. I always tell him, not till chickens come double-breasted like overcoats can he get it in this house, with Vetsburg such a star boarder."

"Last night's chicken, let me tell you, I don't wish it to a dog! Such a piece of dark meat with gizzard I had to swallow."

Mrs. Katz adjusted with greater security the expanse of white napkin across her ample bosom. Gold rings and a quarter-inch marriage band flashed in and out among the litter of small tub-shaped dishes surrounding her, and a pouncing fork of short, sure stab. "Right away my husband gets mad when I say the same thing. 'When we don't like it we should move,' he says."

"Like moving is so easy, if you got two chairs and a hair mattress to take with you. But I always say, Mrs. Katz, I don't blame Mrs. Kaufman herself for what goes on; there's *one* good woman if there ever was one!"

"They don't come no better or no better-looking, my husband always says. 'S-ay,' I tell him, 'she can stand her good looks.'"

"It's that big-ideaed daughter is more to blame. Did you see yet her new white spats to-night?

Right away the minute they come out she has to have 'em. I'm only surprised she 'ain't got one of them red hats from Gimp's what is all the fad. Believe me, if not for such ideas, her mother could afford something better as succotash for us for supper."

"It's a shame, let me tell you, that a woman like Mrs. Kaufman can't see for herself such things. God forbid I should ever be so blind to my Irving. I tell you that Ruby has got it more like a queen than a boarding-house-keeper's daughter. Spats, yet!"

"Rich girls could be glad to have it always so good."

"I don't say nothing how her mother treats Vetsburg, her oldest boarder, and for what he pays for that second floor front and no lunches she can afford to cater a little; but that such a girl shouldn't be made to take up a little stenography or help with the housework!"

"S-ay, when that girl even turns a hand, pale like a ghost her mother gets."

"How girls are raised nowadays, even the poor ones!"

"I ain't the one to complain, Mrs. Katz, but just look down there, that red stuff."

"Where?"

"Ain't it cranberry between Ruby and Vetsburg?"

"Yes, yes, and look such a dish of it!"

"Is it right extras should be allowed to be brought on a table like this where fourteen other boarders got to let their mouth water and look at it?"

"You think it don't hurt like a knife! For myself

I don't mind, but my Irving! How that child loves 'em, and he should got to sit at the same table without cranberries."

From the head of the table the flashing implements of carving held in askance for stroke, her lips lifted to a smile and a simulation of interest for display of further carnivorous appetites, Mrs. Kaufman passed her nod from one to the other.

"Miss Arndt, little more? No? Mr. Krakower? Gravy? Mrs. Suss? Mr. Suss? So! Simon? Mr. Schloss? Miss Horowitz? Mr. Vetsburg, let me give you this little tender— No? Then, Ruby, here let mama give you just a little more—"

"No, no, mama, please!" She caught at the hovering wrist to spare the descent of the knife.

By one of those rare atavisms by which a poet can be bred of a peasant or peasant be begot of poet, Miss Ruby Kaufman, who was born in Newark, posthumous, to a terrified little parent with a black ribbon at the throat of her gown, had brought with her from no telling where the sultry eyes and tropical-turned skin of spice-kissed winds. The corpuscles of a shah might have been running in the blood of her, yet Simon Kaufman, and Simon Kaufman's father before him, had sold wool remnants to cap-factories on commission.

"Ruby, you don't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Ain't it a shame, Mr. Vetsburg, a girl should be so dainty?"

Mr. Meyer Vetsburg cast a beetling glance down upon Miss Kaufman, there so small beside him, and tinked peremptorily against her plate three times with his fork. "Eat, young lady, like your mama

wants you should, or, by golly! I'll string you up for my watch-fob—not, Mrs. Kaufman?"

A smile lay under Mr. Vetsburg's gray-and-black mustache. Gray were his eyes, too, and his suit, a comfortable baggy suit with the slouch of the wearer impressed into it, the coat hiking center back, the pocket-flaps half in, half out, and the knees sagging out of press.

"That's right, Mr. Vetsburg, you should scold her when she don't eat."

Above the black-bombazine basque, so pleasantly relieved at the throat by a V of fresh white net, a wave of color moved up Mrs. Kaufman's face into her architectural coiffure, the very black and very coarse skein of her hair wound into a large loose mound directly atop her head and pierced there with a ball-topped comb of another decade.

"I always say, Mr. Vetsburg, she minds you before she minds anybody else in the world."

"Ma," said Miss Kaufman, close upon that remark, "some succotash, please."

From her vantage down-table, Mrs. Katz leaned a bit forward from the line.

"Look, Mrs. Finshriber, how for a woman her age she snaps her black eyes at him. It ain't hard to guess when a woman's got a marriageable daughter —not?"

"You can take it from me she'll get him for her Ruby yet! And take it from me, too, almost any girl I know, much less Ruby Kaufman, could do worse as get Meyer Vetsburg."

"S-say, I wish it to her to get him. For why once

in a while shouldn't a poor girl get a rich man except in books and choruses?"

"Believe me, a girl like Ruby can manage what she wants. Take it from me, she's got it behind her ears."

"I should say so."

"Without it she couldn't get in with such a crowd of rich girls like she does. I got it from Mrs. Abrams in the Arline Apartments how every week she plays five hundred with Nathan Shapiro's daughter."

"No! Shapiro & Stein?"

"And yesterday at matinée in she comes with a box of candy and laughing with that Rifkin girl! How she gets in with such swell girls, I don't know, but there ain't a nice Saturday afternoon I don't see that girl walking on Fifth Avenue with just such a crowd of fine-dressed girls, all with their noses powdered so white and their hats so little and stylish."

"I wouldn't be surprised if her mother don't send her down to Atlantic City over Easter again if Vetsburg goes. Every holiday she has to go lately like it was coming to her."

"Say, between you and me, I don't put it past her it's that Markovitch boy down there she's after. Ray Klein saw 'em on the boardwalk once together, and she says it's a shame for the people how they sat so close in a rolling-chair."

"I wouldn't be surprised she's fresh with the boys, but, believe me, if she gets the uncle she don't take the nephew!"

"Say, a clerk in his own father's hotel like the Markovitches got in Atlantic City ain't no crime."

"Her mother has got bigger thoughts for her than that. For why I guess she thinks her daughter should take the nephew when maybe she can get the uncle herself. Nowadays it ain't nothing no more that girls marry twice their own age."

"I always say I can tell when Leo Markovitch comes down, by the way her mother's face gets long and the daughter's gets short."

"Can you blame her? Leo Markovitch, with all his monograms on his shirt-sleeves and such black rims on his glasses, ain't the Rosenthal Vetsburg Hosiery Company, not by a long shot! There ain't a store in this town you ask for the No Hole Guaranteed Stocking, right away they don't show it to you. Just for fun always I ask."

"Cornstarch pudding! Irving, stop making that noise at Mrs. Kaufman! Little boys should be seen and not heard even at cornstarch pudding."

"*Gott!* Wouldn't you think, Mrs. Katz, how Mrs. Kaufman knows how I hate desserts that wabble, a little something extra she could give me."

"How she plays favorite, it's a shame. I wish you'd look, too, Mrs. Finshriber, how Flora Proskauer carries away from the table her glass of milk with slice bread on top. I tell you it don't give tune to a house the boarders should carry away from the table like that. Irving, come and take with you that extra piece cake. Just so much board we pay as Flora Proskauer."

The line about the table broke suddenly, attended with a scraping of chairs and after-dinner chirrupings attended with toothpicks. A blowsy maid strained herself immediately across the strewn table

and cloying lamb-platter, and turned off two of the three gas-jets.

In the yellow gloom, the odors of food permeating it, they filed out and up the dim-lit stairs into dim-lit halls, the line of conversation and short laughter drifting after.

A door slammed. Another. Irving Katz leaped from his third-floor threshold to the front hearth, quaking three layers of chandeliers. From Morris Krakower's fourth floor back the tune of a flute began to wind down the stairs. Out of her just-closed door Mrs. Finshriber poked a frizzled gray head.

"Ice-water, ple-ase, Mrs. Kauf-man."

At the door of the first floor back Mrs. Kaufman paused with her hand on the knob.

"Mama, let me run and do it."

"Don't you move, Ruby. When Annie goes up to bed is time enough. Won't you come in for a while, Mr. Vetsburg?"

"Don't care if I do."

She opened the door, entering cautiously. "Let me light up, Mrs. Kaufman." He struck a phosphorescent line on the sole of his shoe, turning up three jets.

"You must excuse, Mr. Vetsburg, how this room looks. All day we been sewing for Ruby her new dress."

She caught up a litter of dainty pink frills in the making, clearing a chair for him.

"Sit down, Mr. Vetsburg."

They adjusted themselves around the shower of gaslight, Miss Kaufman fumbling in her flowered

work-bag, finally curling her foot up under her, her needle flashing and shirring through one of the pink flounces.

"Ruby, in such a light you shouldn't strain your eyes."

"All right, ma," stitching placidly on.

"What 'll you give me, Ruby, if I tell you whose favorite color is pink?"

"Aw, Vetsy!" she cried, her face like a rose, "*your* color's pink!"

From the depths of an inverted sewing-machine top Mrs. Kaufman fished out another bit of the pink, ruffling it with deft needle.

The flute lifted its plaintive voice, feeling for high C.

Mr. Vetsburg lighted a loosely wrapped cigar and slumped in his chair.

"If anybody," he observed, "should ask right this minute where I'm at, tell 'em for me, Mrs. Kaufman, I'm in the most comfortable chair in the house."

"You should keep it, then, up in your room, Mr. Vetsburg, and not always bring it down again when I get Annie to carry it up to you."

"Say, I don't give up so easy my excuse for dropping in evenings."

"Honest, you—you two children, you ought to have a fence built around you the way you like always to be together."

He sat regarding her, puffing and chewing his live cigar. Suddenly he leaped forward, his hand closing rigidly over hers.

"Mrs. Kaufman!"

"What?"

"Quick, there's a hole in your chin."

"*Gott!* a—a—what?"

At that he relaxed at his own pleasantry, laughing and shrugging. With small white teeth Miss Kaufman bit off an end of thread.

"Don't let him tease you, ma; he's after your dimple again."

"*Ach, du*—tease, you! Shame! Hole in my chin he scares me with!"

She resumed her work with a smile and a twitching at her lips that she was unable to control. A warm flow of air came in, puffing the lace curtains. A faint odor of departed splendor lay in that room, its high calcimined ceiling with the floral rosette in the center, the tarnished pier-glass tilted to reflect a great pair of walnut folding-doors which cut off the room where once it had flowed on to join the great length of *salon* parlor. A folding-bed with an inlay of mirror and a collapsible desk arrangement backed up against those folding-doors. A divan with a winding back and sleek with horsehair was drawn across a corner, a marble-topped bureau alongside. A bronze clock ticked roundly from the mantel, balanced at either side by a pair of blue-glass cornucopias with warts blown into them.

Mrs. Kaufman let her hands drop idly in her lap and her head fell back against the chair. In repose the lines of her mouth turned up, and her throat, where so often the years eat in first, was smooth and even slender above the rather round swell of bosom.

"Tired, mommy?"

"Always around Easter spring fever right away gets hold of me!"

Mr. Vetsburg bit his cigar, slumped deeper, and inserted a thumb in the arm of his waistcoat.

"Why, Mrs. Kaufman, don't you and Ruby come down by Atlantic City with me to-morrow over Easter? Huh? A few more or less don't make no difference to my sister the way they get ready for crowds."

Miss Kaufman shot forward, her face vivid.

"Oh, Vetsy," she cried, and a flush rushed up, completely dyeing her face. His face lit with hers, a sunburst of fine lines radiating from his eyes.

"Eh?"

"Why—why, we—we'd just love it, wouldn't we, ma? Atlantic City, Easter Day! Ma!"

Mrs. Kaufman sat upright with a whole procession of quick emotions flashing their expressions across her face. They ended in a smile that trembled as she sat regarding the two of them.

"I should say so, yes! I— You and Ruby go, Mr. Vetsburg. Atlantic City, Easter Day, I bet is worth the trip. I— You two go, I should say so, but you don't want an old woman to drag along with you."

"Ma! Just listen to her, Vetsy! Ain't she—ain't she just the limit? Half the time when we go in stores together they take us for sisters, and then she—she begins to talk like that to get out of going!"

"Ruby don't understand; but it ain't right, Mr. Vetsburg, I should be away over Saturday and Sunday. On Easter always they expect a little extra, and with Annie's sore ankle, I—I—"

"Oh, mommy, can't you leave this old shebang for only two days just for an Easter Sunday down at Atlantic, where—where everybody goes?"

"You know yourself, Ruby, how always on Annie's Sunday out—"

"Well, what of it? It won't hurt all them old things up-stairs that let you wait on them hand and foot all year to go without a few frills for their Easter dinner."

"Ruby!"

"I mean it. The old gossip-pots! I just sat and looked at them there at supper just now, and I said to myself, I said, to think they drown kittens and let those poor lumps live!"

"Ruby, ain't you ashamed to talk like that?"

"Sat there and looked at poor old man Katz with his ear all ragged like it had been chewed off, and wondered why he didn't just go down to Brooklyn Bridge for a high jump."

"Ruby, I—"

"If all those big, strapping women, Suss and Finshriber and the whole gang of them, were anything but vegetables, they'd get out and hustle with keeping house, to work some of their flabbiness off and give us a chance to get somebody in besides a chocolate-eating, novel-reading crowd of useless women who think, mommy, you're a dumbwaiter, chambermaid, lady's maid, and French chef rolled in one! Honest, ma, if you carry that ice-water up to Katz to-night on the sly, with that big son of hers to come down and get it, I—I'll go right up and tell her what I think of her if she leaves to-morrow."

"Mr. Vetsburg, you—you mustn't listen to her."

"Can't take a day off for a rest at Atlantic City because their old Easter dinner might go down the wrong side. Honest, mama, to — to think how you're letting a crowd of old, flabby women that ain't fit even to wipe your shoes make a regular servant out of you! Mommy!"

There were tears in Miss Kaufman's voice and actual tears, big and bright, in her eyes, and two spots of color had popped out in her cheeks.

"Ruby, when—when a woman like me makes her living off her boarders, she can't afford to be so particular. You think it's a pleasure I can't slam the door right in Mrs. Katz's face when six times a day she orders towels and ice-water? You think it's a pleasure I got to take sass from such a bad boy like Irving? I tell you, Ruby, it's easy talk from a girl what don't understand. *Ach*, you —you make me ashamed before Mr. Vetsburg you should run down so the people we make our living off of."

Miss Kaufman flashed her vivid face toward Mr. Vetsburg, still low there in his chair. She was trembling. "Vetsy knows! He's the only one in this house does know! He 'ain't been here with us ten years, ever since we started in this big house, not—not to know he's the only one thinks you're here for anything except impudence and running stairs and standing sass from the bad boys of lazy mothers. You know, don't you, Vetsy?"

"Ruby! Mr. Vetsburg, you—you must excuse—"

From the depths of his chair Mr. Vetsburg's voice came slow and carefully weighed. "My only complaint, Mrs. Kaufman, with what Ruby has got to

say is it ain't strong enough. It maybe ain't none of my business, but always I have told you that for your own good you're too *gemütlich*. No wonder every boarder what you got stays year in and year out till even the biggest kickers pay more board sooner as go. In my business, Mrs. Kaufman, it's the same, right away if I get too easy with—"

"But, Mr. Vetsburg, a poor woman can't afford to be so independent. I got big expenses and big rent; I got a daughter to raise—"

"Mama, haven't I begged you a hundred times to let me take up stenography and get out and hustle so you can take it easy—haven't I?"

A thick coating of tears sprang to Mrs. Kaufman's eyes and muddled the gaze she turned toward Mr. Vetsburg. "Is it natural, Mr. Vetsburg, a mother should want her only child should have always the best and do always the things she never herself could afford to do? All my life, Mr. Vetsburg, I had always to work. Even when I was five months married to a man what it looked like would some day do big things in the wool business, I was left all of a sudden with nothing but debts and my baby."

"But, mama—"

"Is it natural, Mr. Vetsburg, I should want to work off my hands my daughter should escape that? Nothing, Mr. Vetsburg, gives me so much pleasure she should go with all those rich girls who like her well enough poor to be friends with her. Always when you take her down to Atlantic City on holidays, where she can meet 'em, it—it—"

"But, mommy, is it any fun for a girl to keep

taking trips like that with—with her mother always at home like a servant? What do people think? Every holiday that Vetsy asks me, you—you back out. I—I won't go without you, mommy, and—and I *want* to go, ma, I—I *want* to!"

"My Easter dinner and—"

"You, Mrs. Kaufman, with your Easter dinner! Ruby's right. When your mama don't go this time not one step we go by ourselves—ain't it?"

"Not a step."

"But—"

"To-morrow, Mrs. Kaufman, we catch that one-ten train. Twelve o'clock I call in for you. Put ginger in your mama, Ruby, and we'll open her eyes on the boardwalk—not?"

"Oh, Vetsy!"

He smiled, regarding her.

Tears had fallen and dried on Mrs. Kaufman's cheeks; she wavered between a hysteria of tears and laughter.

"I—children—" She succumbed to tears, daubing her eyes shamefacedly.

He rose kindly. "Say, when such a little thing can upset her it's high time she took for herself a little rest. If she backs out, we string her up by the thumbs—not, Ruby?"

"We're going, ma. Going! You'll love the Markovitchs' hotel, ma dearie, right near the boardwalk, and the grandest glassed-in porch and—and chairs, and—and nooks, and things. Ain't they, Vetsy?"

"Yes, you little Ruby, you," he said, regarding her with warm, insinuating eyes, even crinkling an eyelid in a wink.

She did not return the glance, but caught her cheeks in the vise of her hands as if to stem the too quick flush. "Now you—you quit!" she cried, flashing her back upon him in quick pink confusion.

"She gets mad yet," he said, his shoulders rising and falling in silent laughter.

"Don't!"

"Well," he said, clicking the door softly after him, "good night and sleep tight."

"'Night, Vetsy."

Upon the click of that door Mrs. Kaufman leaned softly forward in her chair, speaking through a scratch in her throat. "Ruby!"

With her flush still high, Miss Kaufman danced over toward her parent, then as suddenly ebbed in spirit, the color going. "Why, mommy, what—what you crying for, dearie? Why, there's nothing to cry for, dearie, that we're going off on a toot tomorrow. Honest, dearie, like Vetsy says, you're all nerves. I bet from the way Suss hollered at you to-day about her extra milk you're upset yet. Wouldn't I give her a piece of my mind, though! Here, move your chair, mommy, and let me pull down the bed."

"I—I'm all right, baby. Only I just tell you it's enough to make anybody cry we should have a friend like we got in Vetsburg. I—I tell you, baby, they just don't come better than him. Not, baby? Don't be ashamed to say so to mama."

"I ain't, mama! And, honest, his—his whole family is just that way. Sweet-like and generous. Wait till you see the way his sister and brother-in-

law will treat us at the hotel to-morrow. And—and Leo, too."

"I always say the day what Meyer Vetsburg, when he was only a clerk in the firm, answered my furnished-room advertisement was the luckiest day in my life."

"You ought to heard, ma. I was teasing him the other day, telling him that he ought to live at the Savoy, now that he's a two-thirds member of the firm."

"Ruby!"

"I was only teasing, ma. You just ought to seen his face. Any day he'd leave us!"

Mrs. Kaufman placed a warm, insinuating arm around her daughter's slim waist, drawing her around the chair-side and to her. "There's only one way, baby, Meyer Vetsburg can ever leave me and make me happy when he leaves."

"Ma, what you mean?"

"You know, baby, without mama coming right out in words."

"Ma, honest I don't. What?"

"You see it coming just like I do. Don't fool mama, baby."

The slender lines of Miss Kaufman's waist stiffened, and she half slipped from the embrace.

"Now, now, baby, is it wrong a mother should talk to her own baby about what is closest in both their hearts?"

"I—I—mama, I—I don't know!"

"How he's here in this room every night lately, Ruby, since you—you're a young lady. How right away he follows us up-stairs. How lately he invited

you every month down at Atlantic City. Baby, you ain't blind, are you?"

"Why, mama—why, mama, what is Meyer Vetsburg to—to me? Why, he—he's got gray hair, ma; he—he's getting bald. Why, he—he don't know I'm on earth. He—he's—"

"You mean, baby, he don't know anybody else is on earth. What's, nowadays, baby, a man forty? Why—why, ain't mama forty-one, baby, and didn't you just say yourself for sisters they take us?"

"I know, ma, but he—he— Why, he's got an accent, ma, just like old man Katz and—and all of 'em. He says 'too-sand' for thousand. He—"

"Baby, ain't you ashamed like it makes any difference how a good man talks?" She reached out, drawing her daughter by the wrists down into her lap. "You're a bad little flirt, baby, what pretends she don't know what a blind man can see."

Miss Kaufman's eyes widened, darkened, and she tugged for the freedom of her wrists. "Ma, quit scaring me!"

"Scaring you! That such a rising man like Vetsburg, with a business he worked himself into president from clerk, looks every day more like he's falling in love with you, should scare you!"

"Ma, not—not him!"

In reply she fell to stroking the smooth black plaits, wound coronet fashion about Miss Kaufman's small head. Large, hot tears sprang to her eyes. "Baby, when you talk like that it's you that scares mama!"

"He—he—"

"Why, you think, Ruby, I been making out of

myself a servant like you call it all these years except for your future? For myself a smaller house without such a show and maybe five or six roomers without meals, you think ain't easier as this big barn? For what, baby, you think I always want you should have extravagances maybe I can't afford and should keep up with the fine girls what you meet down by Atlantic City if it ain't that a man like Meyer Vetsburg can be proud to choose you from the best?"

"Mama! mama!"

"Don't think, Ruby, when the day comes what I can give up this white-elephant house that it won't be a happy one for me. Every night when I hear from up-stairs how Mrs. Katz and all of them hollers down 'towels' and 'ice-water' to me like I—I was their slave, don't think, baby, I won't be happiest woman in this world the day what I can slam the door, bang, right on the words."

"Mama, mama, and you pretending all these years you didn't mind!"

"I don't, baby. Not one minute while I got a future to look forward to with you. For myself, you think I ask anything except my little girl's happiness? Anyways, when happiness comes to you with a man like Meyer Vetsburg, don't—don't it come to me, too, baby?"

"Please, I—"

"That's what my little girl can do for mama, better as stenography. Set herself down well. That's why, since we got on the subject, baby, I—I hold off signing up the new lease, with every day Shulif fussing so. Maybe, baby, I—well, just maybe—eh, baby?"

For answer a torrent of tears so sudden that they came in an avalanche burst from Miss Kaufman, and she crumpled forward, face in hands and red rushing up the back of her neck and over her ears.

"Ruby!"

"No, no, ma! No, no!"

"Baby, the dream what I've dreamed five years for you!"

"No, no, no!"

She fell back, regarding her.

"Why, Ruby. Why, Ruby, girl!"

"It ain't fair. You mustn't!"

"Mustn't?"

"Mustn't! Mustn't!" Her voice had slipped up now and away from her.

"Why, baby, it's natural at first maybe a girl should be so scared. Maybe I shouldn't have talked so soon except how it's getting every day plainer, these trips to Atlantic City and—"

"Mama, mama, you're killing me." She fell back against her parent's shoulder, her face frankly distorted.

A second, staring there into space, Mrs. Kaufman sat with her arm still entwining the slender but lax form. "Ruby, is—is it something you ain't telling mama?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy!"

"Is there?"

"I—I don't know."

"Ruby, should you be afraid to talk to mama, who don't want nothing but her child's happiness?"

"You know, mommy. You know!"

"Know what, baby?"

"I—er—"

"Is there somebody else you got on your mind, baby?"

"You know, mommy."

"Tell mama, baby. It ain't a—a crime if you got maybe somebody else on your mind."

"I can't say it, mommy. It—it wouldn't be—be nice."

"Nice?"

"He—he— We ain't even sure yet."

"He?"

"Not—yet."

"Who?"

"You know."

"So help me, I don't."

"Mommy, don't make me say it. Maybe if—when his uncle Meyer takes him in the business, we—"

"Baby, not Leo?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy!" And she buried her hot, revealing face into the fresh net V.

"Why—why, baby, a—a *boy* like that!"

"Twenty-three, mama, ain't a boy!"

"But, Ruby, just a clerk in his father's hotel, and two older brothers already in it. A—a boy that 'ain't got a start yet."

"That's just it, ma. We—we're waiting! Waiting before we talk even—even much to each other yet. Maybe—maybe his uncle Meyer is going to take him in the business, but it ain't sure yet. We—"

"A little yellow-haired boy like him that—that

can't support you, baby, unless you live right there in his mother's and father's hotel away—away from me!"

"Ma!"

"Ruby, a smart girl like you. A little snip what don't make salt yet, when you can have the uncle hisself!"

"I can't help it, ma! If—if—the first time Vetsy took me down to—to the shore, if—if Leo had been a king or a—or just what he is, it wouldn't make no difference. I—I can't help my—my feelings, ma. I can't!"

A large furrow formed between Mrs. Kaufman's eyes, darkening her.

"You wouldn't, Ruby!" she said, clutching her.

"Oh, mommy, mommy, when a—a girl can't help a thing!"

"He ain't good enough for you, baby!"

"He's ten times too good; that—that's all you know about it. Mommy, please! I—I just can't help it, dearie. It's just like when I—I saw him a—a clock began to tick inside of me. I—"

"O my God!" said Mrs. Kaufman, drawing her hand across her brow.

"His uncle Meyer, ma, 's been hinting all along he—he's going to give Leo his start and take him in the business. That's why we—we're waiting without saying much, till it looks more like—like we can all be together, ma."

"All my dreams! My dreams I could give up the house! My baby with a well-to-do husband maybe on Riverside Drive. A servant for herself, so I could pass, maybe, Mrs. Suss and Mrs. Katz by on

the street. Ruby, you—you wouldn't, Ruby. After how I've built for you!"

"Oh, mama, mama, mama!"

"If you 'ain't got ambitions for yourself, Ruby, think once of me and this long dream I been dreaming for—us."

"Yes, ma. Yes."

"Ruby, Ruby, and I always thought when you was so glad for Atlantic City, it was for Vetsburg; to show him how much you liked his folks. How could I know it was—"

"I never thought, mommy. Why—why, Vetsy he's just like a relation or something."

"I tell you, baby, it's just an idea you got in your head."

"No, no, mama. No, no."

Suddenly Mrs. Kaufman threw up her hands, clasping them tight against her eyes, pressing them in frenzy. "O my God!" she cried. "All for nothing!" and fell to moaning through her laced fingers. "All for nothing! Years. Years. Years."

"Mommy darling!"

"Oh—don't, don't! Just let me be. Let me be. O my God! My God!"

"Mommy, please, mommy! I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it, mommy darling."

"I can't go on all the years, Ruby. I'm tired. Tired, girl."

"Of course you can't, darling. We— I don't want you to. 'Shh-h-h!"

"It's only you and my hopes in you that kept me going all these years. The hope that, with some

day a good man to provide for you, I could find a rest, maybe."

"Yes, yes."

"Every time what I think of that long envelope laying there on that desk with its lease waiting to be signed to-morrow, I—I could squeeze my eyes shut so tight and wish I didn't never have to open them again on this—this house and this drudgery. If you marry wrong, baby, I'm caught. Caught in this house like a rat in a trap."

"No, no, mommy. Leo, he—his uncle—"

"Don't make me sign that new lease, Ruby. Shulif hounds me every day now. Any day I expect he says is my last. Don't make me saddle another five years with the house. He's only a boy, baby, and years it will take, and—I'm tired, baby. Tired! Tired!" She lay back with her face suddenly held in rigid lines and her neck ribbed with cords.

At sight of her so prostrate there, Ruby Kaufman grasped the cold face in her ardent young hands, pressing her lips to the streaming eyes.

"Mommy, I didn't mean it. I didn't! I—We're just kids, flirting a little, Leo and me. I didn't mean it, mommy!"

"You didn't mean it, Ruby, did you? Tell mama you didn't."

"I didn't, ma. Cross my heart. It's only I—I kinda had him in my head. That's all, dearie. That's all!"

"He can't provide, baby."

"'Shh-h-h, ma! Try to get calm, and maybe then—then things can come like you want 'em.

'Shh-h-h, dearie! I didn't mean it. 'Course Leo's only a kid. I— We— Mommy dear, don't. You're killing me. I didn't mean it. I didn't."

"Sure, baby? Sure?"

"Sure."

"Mama's girl," sobbed Mrs. Kaufman, scooping the small form to her bosom and relaxing. "Mama's own girl that minds."

They fell quiet, cheek to cheek, staring ahead into the gaslit quiet, the clock ticking into it.

The tears had dried on Mrs. Kaufman's cheeks, only her throat continuing to throb and her hand at regular intervals patting the young shoulder pressed to her. It was as if her heart lay suddenly very still in her breast.

"Mama's own girl that minds."

"It—it's late, ma. Let me pull down the bed."

"You ain't mad at mama, baby? It's for your own good as much as mine. It is unnatural a mother should want to see her—"

"No, no, mama. Move, dearie. Let me pull down the bed. There you are. Now!"

With a wrench Mrs. Kaufman threw off her recurring inclination to tears, moving casually through the processes of their retirement.

"To-morrow, baby, I tighten the buttons on them new spats. How pretty they look."

"Yes, dearie."

"I told Mrs. Katz to-day right out her Irving can't bring any more his bicycle through my front hall. Wasn't I right?"

"Of course you were, ma."

"Miss Flora looked right nice in that pink waist

to-night—not? Four-eighty-nine only, at Gimp's sale."

"She's too fat for pink."

"You get in bed first, baby, and let mama turn out the lights."

"No, no, mama; you."

In her white slip of a nightdress, her coronet braids unwound and falling down each shoulder, even her slightness had waned. She was like Juliet who at fourteen had eyes of maid and martyr

They crept into bed, grateful for darkness.

The flute had died out, leaving a silence that was plaintive.

"You all right, baby?"

"Yes, ma." And she snuggled down into the curve of her mother's arm. "Are you, mommy?"

"Yes, baby."

"Go to sleep, then."

"Good night, baby."

"Good night, mommy."

Silence.

Lying there, with her face upturned and her eyes closed, a stream of quiet tears found their way from under Miss Kaufman's closed lids, running down and toward her ears like spectacle frames.

An hour ticked past, and two damp pools had formed on her pillow.

"Asleep yet, baby?"

"Almost, ma."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You—you ain't mad at mama?"

"'Course not, dearie."

"I—thought it sounded like you was crying."

"Why, mommy, 'course not! Turn over now and go to sleep."

Another hour, and suddenly Mrs. Kaufman shot out her arm from the coverlet, jerking back the sheet and feeling for her daughter's dewy, upturned face where the tears were slashing down it.

"Baby!"

"Mommy, you—you mustn't!"

"Oh, my darling, like I didn't suspicion it!"

"It's only—"

"You got, Ruby, the meanest mama in the world. But you think, darling, I got one minute's happiness like this?"

"I'm all right, mommy, only—"

"I been laying here half the night, Ruby, thinking how I'm a bad mother what thinks only of her own—"

"No, no, mommy. Turn over and go to sl—"

"My daughter falls in love with a fine, upright young man like Leo Markovitch, and I ain't satisfied yet! Suppose maybe for two or three years you ain't so much on your feet. Suppose even his uncle Meyer don't take him in. Don't any young man got to get his start slow?"

"Mommy!"

"Because I got for her my own ideas, my daughter shouldn't have in life the man she wants!"

"But, mommy, if—"

"You think for one minute, Ruby, after all these years without this house on my hands and my boarders and their kicks, a woman like me would be satisfied? Why, the more, baby, I think of such a

thing, the more I see it for myself! What you think, Ruby, I do all day without steps to run, and my gedinks with housekeeping and marketing after eighteen years of it? At first, Ruby, ain't it natural it should come like a shock that you and that rascal Leo got all of a sudden so—so thick? I—It ain't no more, baby. I—I feel fine about it."

"Oh, mommy, if—if I thought you did!"

"I do. Why not? A fine young man what my girl is in love with. Every mother should have it so."

"Mommy, you mean it?"

"I tell you I feel fine. You don't need to feel bad or cry another minute. I can tell you I feel happy. To-morrow at Atlantic City if such a rascal don't tell me for himself, I—I ask him right out!"

"Ma!"

"For why yet he should wait till he's got better prospects, so his mother-in-law can hang on? I guess not!"

"Mommy darling. If you only truly feel like that about it. Why, you can keep putting off the lease, ma, if it's only for six months, and then we—we'll all be to—"

"Of course, baby. Mama knows. Of course!"

"He—I just can't begin to tell you, ma, the kind of a fellow Leo is till you know him better, mommy dear."

"Always Vetsburg says he's a wide-awake one!"

"That's just what he is, ma. He's just a prince if—if there ever was one. One little prince of a fellow." She fell to crying softly, easy tears that flowed freely.

"I—I can tell you, baby, I'm happy as you."

"Mommy dear, kiss me."

They talked, huddled arm in arm, until dawn flowed in at the window and dirty roofs began to show against a clean sky. Footsteps began to clatter through the asphalt court and there came the rattle of milk-cans.

"I wonder if Annie left out the note for Mrs. Suss's extra milk!"

"Don't get up, dearie; it's only five—"

"Right away, baby, with extra towels I must run up to Miss Flora's room. That six o'clock-train for Trenton she gets."

"Ma dear, let me go."

"Lay right where you are! I guess you want you should look all worn out when a certain young man what I know walks down to meet our train at Atlantic City this afternoon, eh?"

"Oh, mommy, mommy!" And Ruby lay back against the luxury of pillows.

At eleven the morning rose to its climax—the butcher, the baker, and every sort of maker hustling in and out the basementway; the sweeping of upstairs halls; windows flung open and lace curtains looped high; the smell of spring pouring in even from asphalt; sounds of scrubbing from various stoops; shouts of drivers from a narrow street wedged with its Saturday-morning blockade of delivery wagons, and a crosstown line of motor-cars, tops back and nosing for the speedway of upper Broadway. A homely bouquet of odors rose from the basement kitchen, drifting up through the halls, the smell of mutton bubbling as it stewed,

After a morning of up-stairs and down-stairs and in and out of chambers, Mrs. Kaufman, enveloped in a long-sleeved apron still angular with starch, hung up the telephone receiver in the hall just beneath the staircase and entered her bedroom, sitting down rather heavily beside the open shelf of her desk. A long envelope lay uppermost on that desk, and she took it up slowly, blinking her eyes shut and holding them squeezed tight as if she would press back a vision, even then a tear oozing through. She blinked it back, but her mouth was wry with the taste of tears.

A slatternly maid poked her head in through the open door. "Mrs. Katz broke 'er mug!"

"Take the one off Mr. Krakow's wash-stand and give it to her, Tillie."

She was crying now frankly, and when the door swung closed, even though it swung back again on its insufficient hinge, she let her head fall forward into the pillow of her arms, the curve of her back rising and falling.

But after a while the greengrocer came on his monthly mission, in his white apron and shirt-sleeves, and she compared stubs with him from a file on her desk and balanced her account with careful squinted glance and a keen eye for an over-charge on a cut of breakfast bacon.

On the very heels of him, so that they met and danced to pass each other in the doorway, Mr. Vetsburg entered, with an overcoat flung across his right arm and his left sagging to a small black traveling-bag.

"Well," he said, standing in the frame of the

open door, his derby well back on his head and regarding her there beside the small desk, "is this what you call ready at twelve?"

She rose and moved forward in her crackly starched apron. "I— Please, Mr. Vetsburg, it ain't right, I know!"

"You don't mean you're not going!" he exclaimed, the lifted quality immediately dropping from his voice.

"You—you got to excuse me again, Mr. Vetsburg. It ain't no use I should try to get away on Saturdays, much less Easter Saturday."

"Well, of all things!"

"Right away, the last minute, Mr. Vetsburg, right one things after another."

He let his bag slip to the floor.

"Maybe, Mrs. Kaufman," he said, "it ain't none of my business, but ain't it a shame a good business woman like you should let herself always be tied down to such a house like she was married to it?"

"But—"

"Can't get away on Saturdays, just like it ain't the same any other day in the week, I ask you! Saturday you blame it on yet!"

She lifted the apron from her hem, her voice hurrying. "You can see for yourself, Mr. Vetsburg, how in my brown silk all ready I was. Even—even Ruby don't know yet I don't go. Down by Gimp's I sent her she should buy herself one of them red straw hats is the fad with the girls now. She meets us down by the station."

"That's a fine come-off, ain't it, to disappoint—"

"At the last minute, Mr. Vetsburg, how things can happen. Out of a clear sky Mrs. Finshriber has to-morrow for Easter dinner that skin doctor, Abrams, and his wife she's so particular about. And Annie with her sore ankle and—"

"A little shyster doctor like Abrams with his advertisements all over the newspapers should sponge off you and your holiday! By golly! Mrs. Kaufman, just like Ruby says, how you let a whole houseful of old hens rule this roost it's a shame!"

"When you go down to station, Mr. Vetsburg, so right away she ain't so disappointed I don't come, tell her maybe to-morrow I—"

"I don't tell her nothing!" broke in Mr. Vetsburg and moved toward her with considerable strengthening of tone. "Mrs. Kaufman, I ask you, do you think it right you should go back like this on Ruby and me, just when we want most you should—"

At that she quickened and fluttered. "Ruby and you! Ach, it's a old saying, Mr. Vetsburg, like the twig is bent so the tree grows. That child won't be so surprised her mother changes her mind. Just so changeable as her mother, and more, is Ruby herself. With that girl, Mr. Vetsburg, it's—it's hard to know what she does one minute from the next. I always say no man—nobody can ever count on a little harum-scarum like—like she is."

He took up her hat, a small turban of breast feathers, laid out on the table beside him, and advanced with it clumsily enough. "Come," he said, "please now, Mrs. Kaufman. Please."

"I—"

"I—I got plans made for us to-morrow down by

the shore that's—that's just fine! Come now, Mrs. Kaufman."

"Please, Mr. Vetsburg, don't force. I—I can't! I always say nobody can ever count on such a little harum-scarum as—"

"You mean to tell me, Mrs. Kaufman, that just because a little shyster doctor—"

Her hand closed over the long envelope again, crunching it. "No, no, that—that ain't all, Mr. Vetsburg. Only I don't want you should tell Ruby. You promise me? How that child worries over little things. Shulif from the agency called up just now. He don't give me one more minute as two this afternoon I—I should sign. How I been putting them off so many weeks with this lease it's a shame. Always you know how in the back of my head I've had it to take maybe a smaller place when this lease was done, but, like I say, talk is cheap and moving ain't so easy done—ain't it? If he puts in new plumbing in the pantry and new hinges on the doors and papers my second floor and Mrs. Suss's alcove, like I said last night, after all I could do worse as stay here another five year—ain't it, Mr. Vetsburg?"

"I—"

"A house what keeps filled so easy, and such a location, with the Subway less as two blocks. I—So you see, Mr. Vetsburg, if I don't want I come back and find my house on the market, maybe rented over my head, I got to stay home for Shulif when he comes to-day."

A rush of dark blood had surged up into Mr. Vetsburg's face, and he twiddled his hat, his dry fingers moving around inside the brim.

"Mrs. Kaufman," he cried—"Mrs. Kaufman, sometimes when for years a man don't speak out his mind, sometimes he busts all of a sudden right out. I—Oh—e-e-e!" and, immediately and thickly inarticulate, made a tremendous feint at clearing his throat, tossed up his hat and caught it; rolled his eyes.

"Mr. Vetsburg?"

"A man, Mrs. Kaufman, can bust!"

"Bust?"

He was still violently dark, but swallowing with less labor. "Yes, from holding in. Mrs. Kaufman, should a woman like you—the finest woman in the world, and I can prove it—a woman, Mrs. Kaufman, who in her heart and my heart and— Should such a woman not come to Atlantic City when I got everything fixed like a stage set!"

She threw out an arm that was visibly trembling. "Mr. Vetsburg, for God's sake, 'ain't I just told you how that she—harum-scarum—she—"

"Will you, Mrs. Kaufman, come or won't you? Will you, I ask you, or won't you?"

"I—I can't, Mr.—"

"All right, then, I—I bust out now. To-day can be as good as to-morrow! Not with my say in a t'ousand years, Mrs. Kaufman, you sign that lease! I ain't a young man any more with fine speeches, Mrs. Kaufman, but not in a t'ousand years you sign that lease."

"Mr. Vetsburg, Ruby— I—"

"If anybody's got a lease on you, Mrs. Kaufman, I—I want it! I want it! That's the kind of a lease would suit me. To be leased to you for always, the rest of your life!"

She could not follow him down the vista of fancy, but stood interrogating him with her heartbeats at her throat. "Mr. Vetsburg, if he puts on the doors and hinges and new plumbing in—"

"I'm a plain man, Mrs. Kaufman, without much to offer a woman what can give out her heart's blood like it was so much water. But all these years I been waiting, Mrs. Kaufman, to bust out, until—till things got riper. I know with a woman like you, whose own happiness always is last, that first your girl must be fixed—"

"She's a young girl, Mr. Vetsburg. You—you mustn't depend— If I had my say—"

"He's a fine fellow, Mrs. Kaufman. With his uncle to help 'em, they got, let me tell you, a better start as most young ones!"

She rose, holding on to the desk.

"I—I—" she said. "What?"

"Lena," he uttered, very softly.

"Lena, Mr. Vetsburg?"

"It 'ain't been easy, Lenie, these years while she was only growing up, to keep off my lips that name. A name just like a leaf off a rose. Lena!" he reiterated and advanced.

Comprehension came quietly and dawning like a morning.

"I—I— Mr. Vetsburg, you must excuse me," she said, and sat down suddenly.

He crossed to the little desk and bent low over her chair, his hand not on her shoulder, but at the knob of her chair. His voice had a swift rehearsed quality.

"Maybe to-morrow, if you didn't back out, it would sound finer by the ocean, Lenie, but it don't

need the ocean a man should tell a woman when she's the first and the finest woman in the world. Does it, Lenie?"

"I—I thought Ruby. She—"

"He's a good boy, Leo is, Lenie. A good boy what can be good to a woman like his father before him. Good enough even for a fine girl like our Ruby, Lenie—*our* Ruby!"

"*Gott im Himmel!* then you—"

"Wide awake, too. With a start like I can give him in my business, you 'ain't got to worry Ruby 'ain't fixed herself with the man what she chooses. To-morrow at Atlantic City all fixed I had it I should tell—"

"You!" she said, turning around in her chair to face him. "You—all along you been fixing—"

He turned sheepish. "Ain't it fair, Lenie, in love and war and business a man has got to scheme for what he wants out of life? Long enough it took she should grow up. I knew all along once those two, each so full of life and being young, got together it was natural what should happen. Mrs. Kaufman! Lenie! Lenie!"

From two flights up, in through the open door and well above the harsh sound of scrubbing, a voice curled down through the hallways and in. "Mrs. Kaufman, ice-water—ple-ase!"

"Lenie," he said, his singing, tingling fingers closing over her wrist.

"Mrs. Kauf-man, ice-water, pl—"

With her free arm she reached and slammed the door, let her cheek lie to the back of his hand, and closed her eyes.

IV

HERS *NOT* TO REASON WHY

IN the third winter of a world-madness, with Europe guzzling blood and wild with the taste of it, America grew flatulent, stenching winds from the battle-field blowing her prosperity.

Granaries filled to bursting tripled in value, and, in congested districts, men with lean faces rioted when bread advanced a cent a loaf. Munition factories, the fires of destruction smelting all night, worked three shifts. Millions of shells for millions of dollars. Millions of lives for millions of shells. A country feeding into the insatiable maw of war with one hand, and with the other pouring relief-funds into coffers bombarded by guns of its own manufacture—quelling the wound with a finger and widening it with a knife up the cuff.

In France, women with blue faces and too often with the pulling lips of babes at dry breasts, learned the bitter tasks of sewing closed the coat sleeves and of cutting off and hemming the trousers leg at the knee.

In America, women new to the feel of fur learned to love it and not question whence it came. Men of small affairs, suddenly earthquaked to the crest

of the great tidal wave of new market-values, went drunk with wealth.

In New York, where so many great forces of a great country coagulate, the face of the city photographed would have been a composite of fat and jowl, rouge and heavy lip—satiated yet insatiate, the head double-chinned and even a little loggy with too many satisfactions.

But that is the New York of the Saturnite and of Teufelsdröckh alone with his stars.

Upon Mrs. Blutch Connors, gazing out upon the tide of West Forty-seventh Street, life lay lightly and as unrelated as if ravage and carnage and the smell of still warm blood were of another planet.

A shower of white light from an incandescent tooth-brush sign opposite threw a pallid reflection upon Mrs. Connors; it spun the fuzz of frizz rising off her blond coiffure into a sort of golden fog and picked out the sequins of her bodice.

The dinner-hour descends glitteringly upon West Forty-seventh Street, its solid rows of long, lanky hotels, actors' clubs, and sixty-cent *tables d'hôte* adding each its candle-power.

From her brace of windows in the Hotel Metropolis, the street was not unlike a gully cut through mica, a honking tributary flowing into the great sea of Broadway. A low, high-power car, shaped like an ellipse, cut through the snarl of traffic, bleating. A woman, wrapped in a greatcoat of "baby" pelts and an almost undistinguishable dog in the cove of her arm, walked out from the Hotel Metropolis across the sidewalk and into a taxicab. An army of derby hats, lowered slightly into the wind,

moved through the white kind of darkness. Standing there, buffeting her pink nails across her pink palms, Mrs. Connors followed the westward trend of that army. Out from it, a face lying suddenly back flashed up at her, a mere petal riding a swift current. But at sight of it Mrs. Blutch Connors inclined her entire body, pressing a smile and a hand against the cold pane, then turned inward, flashing on an electrolier—a bronze Nydia holding out a cluster of frosted bulbs. A great deal of the strong breath of a popular perfume and a great deal of artificial heat lay sweet upon that room, as if many flowers had lived and died in the same air, leaving insidious but slightly stale memories.

The hotel suite has become the brocaded tomb of the old-fashioned garden. The kitchen has shrunk into the chafing-dish, and all the dear old concoctions that mother used to try to make now come tinned, condensed, and predigested in sixty-seven varieties. Even the vine-covered threshold survives only in the booklets of promoters of suburban real estate. In New York, the home-coming spouse arrives on the vertical, shunted out at whatever his layer. Yet, when Mrs. Connors opened the door of her pink-brocaded sitting-room, her spirit rose with the soughing rise of the elevator, and Romance—hardy fellow—showed himself within a murky hotel corridor.

"Honeybunch!"

"Babe!" said Mr. Blutch Connors, upon the slam of the lift door.

And there, in the dim-lit halls, with its rows of closed doors in blank-faced witness thereof, they

embraced, these two, despising, as Flaubert despised, to live in the reality of things.

"My boy's beau-ful cheeks all cold!"

"My girl's beau-ful cheeks all warm and full of some danged good cologne," said Mr. Connors, closing the door of their rooms upon them, pressing her head back against the support of his arm, and kissing her throat as the chin flew up.

He pressed a button, and the room sprang into more light, coming out pinkly and vividly—the brocaded walls pliant to touch with every so often a gilt-framed engraving; a gilt table with an onyx top cheerfully cluttered with the sauciest short-story magazines of the month; a white mantelpiece with an artificial hearth and a pink-and-gilt *chaise-longue* piled high with small, lacy pillows, and a very green magazine open and face downward on the floor beside it.

"Comin' better, honeybunch?"

"I dunno, Babe. The town's mad with money, but I don't feel myself going crazy with any of it."

"What ud you bring us, honey?"

He slid out of his silk-lined greatcoat, placing his brown derby atop.

"Three guesses, Babe," he said, rubbing his cold hands in a dry wash, and smiling from five feet eleven of sartorial accomplishment down upon her.

"Honey darlin'!" said Mrs. Connors, standing erect and placing her cheek against the third button of his waistcoat.

"Wow! how I love the woman!" he cried, closing his hands softly about her throat and tilting her head backward again.

"Darlin', you hurt!"

"Br-r-r—can't help it!"

When Mr. Connors moved, he gave off the scent of pomade freely; his slightly thinning brown hair and the pointy tips to a reddish mustache lay sleek with it. There was the merest suggestion of *embonpoint* to the waistcoat, but not so that, when he dropped his eyes, the blunt toes of his russet shoes were not in evidence. His pin-checked suit was pressed to a knife-edge, and his brocaded cravat folded to a nicety; there was an air of complete well-being about him. Men can acquire that sort of eupeptic well-being in a Turkish bath. Young mothers and life-jobbers have it naturally.

Suddenly, Mrs. Connors began to foray into his pockets, plunging her hand into the right, the left, then stopped suddenly, her little face flashing up at him.

"It's round and furry—my honeybunch brought me a peach! Beau-ful pink peach in December! Nine million dollars my hubby pays to bring him wifey a beau-ful pink peach." She drew it out—a slightly runty one with a forced blush—and bit small white teeth immediately into it.

"M-m-m!"—sitting on the *chaise-longue* and sucking inward. He sat down beside her, a shade graver.

"Is my babe disappointed I didn't dig her coat and earrings out of hock?"

She lay against him.

"I should worry!"

"There just ain't no squeal in my girl."

"Wanna bite?"

"Any one of 'em but you would be hollering for

their junk out of pawn. But, Lord, the way she rigs herself up without it! Where'd you dig up the spangles, Babe? Gad! I gotta take you out to-night and buy you the right kind of a dinner. When I walks my girl into a café, they sit up and take notice, all righty. Spangles she rigs herself up in when another girl, with the way my luck's been runnin', would be down to her shimmy-tail."

She stroked his sleeve as if it had the quality of fur.

"Is the rabbit's foot still kicking my boy?"

"Never seen the like, honey. The cards just won't come. This afternoon I even played the wheel over at Chuck's, and she spun me dirt."

"It's gotta turn, Blutch."

"Sure!"

"Remember the run of rotten luck you had that year in Cincinnati, when the ponies was runnin' at Latonia?"

"Yeh."

"Lost your shirt, hon, and the first day back in New York laid a hundred on the wheel and won me my seal coat. You—we— We couldn't be no lower than that time we got back from Latonia, hon?"

He laid his hand over hers.

"Come on, Babe. Joe 'll be here directly, and then we're going and blow them spangles to a supper."

"Blutch, answer!"

"Now there's nothin' to worry about, Babe. Have I ever landed anywhere but on my feet? We'll be driving a racer down Broadway again before the

winter's over. There's money in motion these war-times, Babe. They can't keep my hands off it."

"Blutch, how—how much did you drop to-day? I could tell clear down on the street you lost, honey, the way you walked so round-shouldered."

"What's the difference, honey? Come; just to show you I'm a sport, I'm going to shoot you and Joe over to Jack's in one of them new white taxi-cabs."

"Blutch, how much?"

"Well, if you gotta know it, they laid me out to-day, Babe. Dropped that nine hundred hock-money like it was a hot potato, and me countin' on bringin' you home your coat and junk again to-night. Gad! Them cards wouldn't come to me with salt on their tails."

"Nine hundred! Blutch, that—that leaves us bleached!"

"I know it, hon. Just never saw the like. Wouldn't care if it wasn't my girl's junk and fur coat. That's what hurts a fellow. If there's one thing he ought to look to, it's to keep his wimmin out of the game."

"It—it ain't that, Blutch; but—but where's it comin' from?"

He struck his thigh a resounding whack.

"With seventy-five bucks in my jeans, girl, the world is mine. Why, before I had my babe for my own, many's the time I was down to shoe-shine money. Up to 'leven years ago it wasn't nothing, honey, for me to sleep on a pool-table one night and *de luxe* the next. If life was a sure thing for me, I'd ask 'em to put me out of my misery. It's

only since I got my girl that I ain't the plunger I used to be. Big Blutch has got his name from the old days, honey, when a dime, a dollar, and a tire-rim was all the same size."

She sat hunched up in the pink-satinet frock, the pink sequins dancing, and her small face smaller because of the way her light hair rose up in the fuzzy aura.

"Blutch, we—we just never was down to the last seventy-five before. That time at Latonia, it was a hundred and more."

"Why, girl, once, at Hot Springs, I had to hock my coat and vest, and I got started on a run of new luck playin' in my shirt-sleeves, pretending I was a summer boy."

"That was the time you gave Lenny Gratz back his losings and got him back to his wife."

"Right-o! Seen him only to-night. He's traveling out of Cleveland for an electric house and has forgot how aces up looks. That boy had as much chance in the game as a deacon."

Mrs. Connors laid hold of Mr. Connors's immaculate coat lapel, drawing him toward her.

"Oh, Blutch—honey—if only—if only—"

"If only what, Babe?"

"If you—you—"

"Why, honey, what's eatin' you? I been down pretty near this low many a time; only, you 'ain't known nothing about it, me not wanting to worry your pretty head. You ain't afraid, Babe, your old hubby can't always take care of his girl A1, are you?"

"No, no, Blutch; only—"

"What, Babe?"

"I wish to God you was out of it, Blutch! I wish to God!"

"Out of what, Babe?"

"The game, Blutch. You're too good, honey, and too—too honest to be in it. What show you got in the end against your playin' pals like Joe Kirby and Al Flexnor? I know that gang, Blutch. I've tried to tell you so often how, when I was a kid livin' at home, that crowd used to come to my mother's—"

"Now, now, girl; business is—"

"You're too good, Blutch, and too honest to be in it. The game 'll break you in the end. It always does. Blutch darling, I wish to God you was out of it!"

"Why, Ann 'Lisbeth, I never knew you felt this way about it."

"I do, Blutch, I do! For years, it's been here in me—here, under my heart—eatin' me, Blutch, eatin' me!" And she placed her hands flat to her breast.

"Why, Babe!"

"I never let on. You— I— You been too good, Blutch, to a girl like—like I was for me to let out a whimper about anything. A man that took a girl like—like me that had knocked around just like—my mother and even—even my grandmother before me had knocked around—took and married me, no questions asked. A girl like me 'ain't got the right to complain to no man, much less to one like you. The heaven you've given me for eleven years, Blutch! The heaven! Sometimes, darlin', just sittin' here in a room like this, with no—no reason for bein' here—it's just like I—"

"Babe, Babe, you mustn't!"

"Sittin' here, waiting for you to come and not carin' for nothing or nobody except that my boy's comin' home to me—it's like I was in a dream, Blutch, and like I was going to wake up and find myself back in my mother's house, and—"

"Babe, you been sittin' at home alone too much. I always tell you, honey, you ought to make friends. Chuck De Roy's wife wants the worst way to get acquainted with you—a nice, quiet girl. It ain't right, Babe, for you not to have no friends at all to go to the matinée with or go buyin' knickknacks with. You're gettin' morbid, honey."

She worked herself out of his embrace, withholding him with her palms pressed out against his chest.

"I 'ain't got nothing in life but you, honey. There ain't nobody else under the sun makes any difference. That's why I want you to get out of it, Blutch. It's a dirty game—the gambling game. You ain't fit for it. You're too good. They've nearly got you now, Blutch. Let's get out, honey, while the goin's good. Let's take them seventy-five bucks and buy us a peanut-stand or a line of goods. Let's be regular folks, darlin'! I'm willin' to begin low down. Don't stake them last seventy-five, Blutch. Break while we're broke. It ain't human nature to break while your luck's with you."

He was for folding her in his arms, but she still withheld him.

"Blutch darlin', it's the first thing I ever asked of you."

He grew grave, looking long into her blue eyes with the tears forming over them.

"Why, Ann 'Lisbeth, danged if I know what to say! You sure you're feelin' well, Babe? 'Ain't took cold, have you, with your fur coat in hock?"

"No, no, no!"

"Well, I—I guess, honey, if the truth was told, your old man ain't cut out for nothing much besides the gamin'-table—a fellow that's knocked around the world the way I have."

"You are, Blutch; you are! You're an expert accountant. Didn't you run the Two Dollar Hat Store that time in Syracuse and get away with it?"

"I know, Babe; but when a fellow's once used to makin' it easy and spendin' it easy, he can't be satisfied lopin' along in a little business. Why, just take to-night, honey! I only brought home my girl a peach this evening, but that ain't sayin' that before morning breaks I can't be bringin' her a couple of two-carat stones."

"No, no, Blutch; I don't want 'em. I swear to God I don't want 'em!"

"Why, Babe, I just can't figure out what's got into you. I never heard you break out like this. Are you scared, honey, because we happen to be lower than—"

"No, no, darlin'; I ain't scared because we're low. I'm scared to get high again. It's the first run of real luck you've had in three years, Blutch. There was no hope of gettin' you out while things was breakin' good for you; but now—"

"I ain't sayin' it's the best game in the world. I'd see a son of mine laid out before I'd let him get into it. But it's what I'm cut out for, and what are you goin' to do about it? 'Ain't you got every-

thing your little heart desires? Ain't we going down to Sheepshead when the first thaw sets in? Ain't we just a pair of love-birds that's as happy as if we had our right senses? Come, Babe; get into your jacket. Joe 'll be here any minute, and I got that porterhouse at Jack's on the brain. Come kiss your hubby."

She held up her face with the tears rolling down it, and he kissed a dry spot and her yellow frizzed bangs.

"My girl! My cry-baby girl!"

"You're all I got in the world, Blutch! Thinkin' of what's best for you has eat into me."

"I know! I know!"

"We'll never get nowheres in this game, hon. We ain't even sure enough of ourselves to have a home like—like regular folks."

"Never you mind, Babe. Startin' first of the year, I'm going to begin to look to a little nest-egg."

"We ought to have it, Blutch. Just think of lettin' ourselves get down to the last seventy-five! What if a rainy day should come—where would we be at? If you—or me should get sick or something."

"You ain't all wrong, girl."

"You'd give the shirt off your back, Blutch; that's why we can't ever have a nest-egg as long as you're playin' stakes. There's too many hard-luck stories lying around loose in the gamblin' game."

"The next big haul I make I'm going to get out, girl, so help me!"

"Blutch!"

"I mean it. We'll buy a chicken-farm."

"Why not a little business, Blutch, in a small town with—"

"There's a great future in chicken-farmin'. I set Boy Higgins up with a five-hundred spot the year his lung went back on him, and he paid me back the second year."

"Blutch darlin', you mean it?"

"Why not, Babe—seein' you want it? There ain't no string tied to me and the green-felt table. I can go through with anything I make up my mind to."

"Oh, honey baby, you promise! Darling little fuzzy chickens!"

"Why, girl, I wouldn't have you eatin' yourself thisaway. The first ten-thou' high-water mark we hit I'm quits. How's that?"

"Ten thousand! Oh, Blutch, we—"

"What's ten thou', girl! I made the Hot Springs haul with a twenty-dollar start. If you ain't careful, we'll be buyin' that chicken-farm next week. That's what can happen to my girl if she starts something with her hubby."

Suddenly Mrs. Connors crumpled in a heap upon the lacy pillows, pink sequins heaving.

"Why, Babe—Babe, what is it? You're sick or something to-night, honey." He lifted her to his arms, bent almost double over her.

"Nothin', Blutch, only—only I just never was so happy."

"Lord!" said Blutch Connors. "All these years, and I never knew anything was eatin' her."

"I—I never was, Blutch."

"Was what?"

"So—happy."

"Lord bless my soul! The poor little thing was afraid to say it was a chicken-farm she wanted!"

He patted her constantly, his eyes somewhat glazy.

"Us two, Blutch, livin' regular."

"You ain't all wrong, girl."

"You home evenings, Blutch, regular like."

"You poor little thing!"

"You'll play safe, Blutch? Play safe to win!"

"I wish I'd have went into the farmin' three years ago, Babe, the week I hauled down eleven thou'."

"You was too fed up with luck then, Blutch. I knew better 'n to ask."

"Lord bless my soul! and the poor little thing was afraid to say it was a chicken-farm she wanted!"

"Promise me, Blutch, you'll play 'em close—to win!"

"Al's openin' up his new rooms to-night. Me and Joe are goin' to play 'em fifty-fifty. It looks to me like a haul, Babe."

"He's crooked, Blutch, I tell you."

"No more 'n all of 'em are, Babe. Your eyes open and your pockets closed is my motto. What you got special against Joe? You mustn't dig up on a fellow, Babe."

"I— Why ain't he livin' in White Plains, where his wife and kids are?"

"What I don't know about the private life of my card friends don't hurt me."

"It's town talk the way he keeps them rooms over at the Liberty. 'Way back when I was a kid, Blutch, I remember how he used to—"

"I know there ain't no medals on Joe, Babe, but

if you don't stop listenin' to town talk, you're going to get them pretty little ears of yours all sooty."

"I know, Blutch; but I could tell you things about him back in the days when my mother—"

"Me and him are goin' over to Al's to-night and try to win my babe the first chicken for her farm. Whatta you bet? Us two ain't much on the sociability end, but we've played many a lucky card fifty-fifty. Saturday is our mascot night, too. Come, Babe; get on your jacket, and—"

"Honeybunch, you and Joe go. I ain't hungry."

"But—"

"I'll have 'em send me up a bite from the grill."

"You ain't sore because I asked Joe? It's business, Babe."

"Of course I ain't, honey; only, with you and him goin' right over to Al's afterward, what's the sense of me goin'? I wanna stay home and think. It's just like beginnin' to-night I could sit here and look right into the time when there ain't goin' to be no more waitin' up nights for my boy. I— They got all little white chickens out at Denny's roadhouse, Blutch—white with red combs. Can we have some like them?"

"You betcher life we can! I'm going to win the beginnings of that farm before I'm a night older. Lordy! Lordy! and to think I never knew anything was eatin' her!"

"Blutch, I—I don't know what to say. I keep cryin' when I wanna laugh. I never was so happy, Blutch. I never was."

"My little kitty-puss!"

At seven o'clock came Mr. Joe Kirby, dark, corpulent, and black of cigar.

"Come right in, Joe! I'm here and waitin' for you."

"Ain't the missis in on this killin'?"

"She— Not this—"

"No, Joe; not—to-night."

"Sorry to hear it," said Mr. Kirby, flecking an inch of cigar-ash to the table-top. "Fine rig-up, with due respect to the lady, your missis is wearing to-night."

"The wife ain't so short on looks, is she?"

"Blutch!"

"You know my sentiments about her. They don't come no ace-higher."

She colored, even quivered, standing there beside the bronze Nydia.

"I tell her we're out for big business to-night, Joe."

"Sky's the limit. Picked up a pin pointin' toward me and sat with my back to a red-headed woman. Can't lose."

"Well, good-night, Babe. Take care o' yourself."

"Good-night, Blutch. You'll play 'em close, honey?"

"You just know I will, Babe."

An hour she sat there, alone on the *chaise-longue*, staring into space and smiling at what she saw there. Finally she dropped back into the lacy mound of pillows, almost instantly asleep, but still smiling.

At four o'clock, that hour before dawn cracks,

even the West Forties, where night is too often cacophonous with the sound of revelry, drop into long narrow aisles of gloom. Thin, high-stooped houses with drawn shades recede into the mouse-colored mist of morning, and, as through quagmire, this mist hovering close to ground, figures skulk—that nameless, shapeless race of many bloods and one complexion, the underground complexion of paste long sour from standing.

At somewhat after that hour Mr. Blutch Connors made exit from one of these houses, noiseless, with scarcely a click after him, and then, without pause, passed down the brownstone steps and eastward. A taxicab slid by, its honk as sorrowful as the cry of a plover in a bog. Another—this one drawing up alongside, in quest of fare. He moved on, his breath clouding the early air, and his hands plunged deep in his pockets as if to plumb their depth. There was a great sag to the silhouette of him moving thus through the gloom, the chest in and the shoulders rounding and lessening their front span. Once he paused to remove the brown derby and wipe at his brow. A policeman struck his stick. He moved on.

An all-night drug-store, the modern sort of emporium where the capsule and the herb have become side line to the ivoritus toilet-set and the pocket-dictionary, threw a white veil of light across the sidewalk. Well past that window, but as if its image had only just caught up with him, Mr. Connors turned back, retracing ten steps. A display-window, denuded of frippery but strewn with straw and crisscrossed with two large strips of poster, pro-

claimed Chicklet Face Powder to the cosmetically concerned. With an eye to fidelity, a small brood of small chickens, half dead with bad air and not larger than fists, huddled rearward and out of the grilling light—puny victims to an indorsed method of correspondence-school advertising.

Mr. Connors entered, scouting out a dozy clerk.

"Say, bo, what's one of them chicks worth?"

"Ain't fer sale."

Mr. Conners lowered his voice, nudging.

"I gotta sick wife, bo. Couldn't you slip me one in a 'mergency?"

"What's the idea—chicken broth? You better go in the park and catch her a chippie."

"On the level, friend, one of them little yellow things would cheer her up. She's great one for pets."

"Can't you see they're half-dead now? What you wanna cheer her up with—a corpse? If I had my way, I'd wring the whole display's neck, anyhow."

"What 'll you take for one, bo?"

"It 'll freeze to death."

"Look! This side pocket is lined with velvet."

"Dollar."

"Aw, I said one, friend, not the whole brood."

"Leave or take."

Mr. Connors dug deep.

"Make it sixty cents and a poker-chip, bo. It's every cent I got in my pocket."

"Keep the poker-chip for pin-money."

When Mr. Connors emerged, a small, chirruping bunch of fuzz, cupped in his hand, lay snug in the velvet-lined pocket.

At Sixth Avenue, where the great skeleton of the Elevated stalks mid-street, like a prehistoric *pithecanthropus erectus*, he paused for an instant in the shadow of a gigantic black pillar, readjusting the fragile burden to his pocket.

Stepping out to cross the street, simultaneously a great silent motor-car, noiseless but wild with speed, tore down the surface-car tracks, blacker in the hulking shadow of the Elevated trellis.

A quick doubling up of the sagging silhouette, and the groan of a clutch violently thrown. A woman's shriek flying thin and high like a javelin of horror. A crowd sprung full grown out of the bog of the morning. White, peering faces showing up in the brilliant paths of the acetylene lamps. A uniform pushing through. A crowbar and the hard breathing of men straining to lift. A sob in the dark. Stand back! Stand back!

Dawn—then a blue, wintry sky, the color and hardness of enamel; and sunshine, bright, yet so far off the eye could stare up to it unsquinting. It lay against the pink-brocaded window-hangings of the suite in the Hotel Metropolis; it even crept in like a timid hand reaching toward, yet not quite touching, the full-flung figure of Mrs. Blutch Connors, lying, her cheek dug into the harshness of the carpet, there at the closed door to the bedroom—prone as if washed there, and her yellow hair streaming back like seaweed. Sobs came, but only the dry kind that beat in the throat and then come shrilly, like a sheet of silk swiftly torn.

How frail are human ties, have said the *beaux*

esprits of every age in one epigrammatic fashion or another. But frailty can bleed; in fact, it's first to bleed.

Lying there, with her face swollen and stamped with the carpet-nap, squirming in a grief that was actually abashing before it was heartbreaking, Ann 'Lisbeth Connors, whose only epiphany of life was love, and shut out from so much else that helps make life sweet, was now shut out from none of its pain.

Once she scratched at the door, a faint, dog-like scratch for admission, and then sat back on her heels, staring at the uncompromising panel, holding back the audibility of her sobs with her hand.

Heart-constricting silence, and only the breath of ether seeping out to her, sweet, insidious. She took to hugging herself violently against a sudden chill that rushed over her, rattling her frame.

The bedroom door swung noiselessly back, fanning out the etheric fumes, and closed again upon an emerging figure.

"Doctor—quick— God!— What?"

He looked down upon her with the kind of glaze over his eyes that Bellini loved to paint, compassion for the pain of the world almost distilled to tears.

"Doctor—he ain't—"

"My poor little lady!"

"O God—no—no—no! No, Doctor, no! You wouldn't! Please! Please! You wouldn't let him leave me here all alone, Doctor! O God! you wouldn't! I'm all alone, Doctor! You see, I'm all alone. Please don't take him from me. He's mine! You can't! Promise me, Doctor! My darlin' in

there—why are you hurtin' him so? Why has he stopped hollerin'? Cut me to pieces to give him what he needs to make him live. Don't take him from me, Doctor. He's all I got! O God—God—please!" And fell back swooning, with an old man's tear splashing down as if to revivify her.

The heart has a resiliency. Strained to breaking, it can contract again. Even the waiting women, Iseult and Penelope, learned, as they sat sorrowing and watching, to sing to the swing of the sea.

When, out of the slough of dark weeks, Mrs. Connors took up life again, she was only beaten, not broken—a reed lashed down by storm and then resilient, daring to lift its head again. A wan little head, but the eyes unwashed of their blue and the irises grown large. The same hard sunshine lay in its path between the brocade curtains of a room strangely denuded. It was as if spring had died there, when it was only the *chaise-longue*, barren of its lacy pillows, a glass vase and silver-framed picture gone from the mantel, a Mexican afghan removed from a divan and showing its bulges.

It was any hotel suite now—uncompromising; leave me or take me.

In taking leave of it, Mrs. Connors looked about her even coldly, as if this barren room were too denuded of its memories.

"You—you been mighty good to me, Joe. It's good to know—everything's—paid up."

Mr. Joe Kirby sat well forward on a straight chair, knees well apart in the rather puffy attitude of the uncomfortably corpulent.

"Now, cut that! Whatever I done for you, Annie, I done because I wanted to. If you'd 'a' listened to me, you wouldn't 'a' gone and sold out your last dud to raise money. Whatcha got friends for?"

"The way you dug down for—for the funeral, Joe. He—he couldn't have had the silver handles or the gray velvet if—if not for you, Joe. He—he always loved everything the best. I can't never forget that of you, Joe—just never."

She was pinning on her little crêpe-edged veil over her decently black hat, and paused now to dab up under it at a tear.

"I'd 'a' expected poor old Blutch to do as much for me."

"He would! He would! Many's the pal he buried."

"I hate, Annie, like anything to see you actin' up like this. You ain't fit to walk out of this hotel on your own hook. Where'd you get that hand-me-down?"

She looked down at herself, quickly reddening.

"It's a warm suit, Joe."

"Why, you 'ain't got a chance! A little thing like you ain't cut out for but one or two things. Coddlin'—that's your line. The minute you're nobody's doll you're goin' to get stepped on and get busted."

"Whatta you know about—"

"What kind of a job you think you're gonna get? Adviser to a corporation lawyer? You're too soft, girl. What chance you think you got buckin' up against a town that wants value received from

a woman. Aw, you know what I mean, Annie. You can't pull that baby stuff all the time."

"You," she cried, beating her small hands together, "oh, you—you—" and then sat down, crying weakly. "Them days back there! Why, I—I was such a kid it's just like they hadn't been! With her and my grandmother dead and gone these twelve years, if it wasn't for you it's—it's like they'd never been."

"Nobody was gladder 'n me, girl, to see how you made a bed for yourself. I'm commendin' you, I am. That's just what I'm tryin' to tell you now, girl. You was cut out to be somebody's kitten, and—"

"O God!" she sobbed into her handkerchief, "why didn't you take me when you took him?"

"Now, now, Annie, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. A good-lookin' woman like you 'ain't got nothing to worry about. Lemme order you up a drink. You're gettin' weak again."

"No, no; I'm taking 'em too often. But they warm me. They warm me, and I'm cold, Joe—cold."

"Then lemme—"

"No! No!"

He put out a short, broad hand toward her.

"Poor little—"

"I gotta go now, Joe. These rooms ain't mine no more."

He barred her path.

"Go where?"

"'Ain't I told you? I'm going out. Anybody that's willin' to work can get it in this town. I ain't the softy you think I am."

He took her small black purse up from the table.

"What's your capital?"

"You—quit!"

"Ten—'leven—fourteen dollars and seventy-four cents."

"You gimme!"

"You can't cut no capers on that, girl."

"I—can work."

He dropped something in against the coins.

It clinked.

She sprang at him.

"No, no; not a cent from you—for myself. I—I didn't know you in them days for nothing. I was only a kid, but I—I know you! I know. You gimme! Gimme!"

He withheld it from her.

"Hold your horses, beauty! What I was then I am now, and I ain't ashamed of it. Human, that's all. The best of us is only human before a pretty woman."

"You gimme!"

She had snatched up her small hand-satchel from the divan and stood flashing now beside him, her small, blazing face only level with his cravat.

"What you spittin' fire for? That wa'n't nothin' I slipped in but my address, girl. When you need me call on me. 'The Liberty, 96.' Go right up in the elevator, no questions asked. Get me?" he said, poking the small purse into the V of her jacket. "Get me?"

"Oh, you— Woh—woh—woh!"

With her face flung back and twisted, and dodging his outflung arm, she was down four flights of

narrow, unused stairs and out. Once in the streets, she walked with her face still thrust up and a frenzy of haste in her stride. Red had popped out in her cheeks. There was voice in each breath—moans that her throat would not hold.

That night she slept in the kind of fifty-cent room the city offers its decent poor. A slit of a room with a black-iron bed and a damp mattress. A wash-stand gaunt with its gaunt mission. A slop-jar on a zinc mat. A caneless-bottom chair. The chair she propped against the door, the top slat of it beneath the knob. Through a night of musty blackness she lay in a rigid line along the bed-edge.

You who love the city for its million pulses, the beat of its great heart, and the terrific symphony of its soul, have you ever picked out from its orchestra the plaintive rune of the deserving poor?

It is like the note of a wind instrument—an oboe adding its slow note to the boom of the kettle-drum, the clang of gold-colored cymbals, and the singing ecstasy of violins.

One such small voice Ann 'Lisbeth Connors added to the great threnody of industry. Department stores that turned from her services almost before they were offered. Offices gleaned from penny papers, miles of them, and hours of waiting on hard-bottom chairs in draughty waiting-rooms. Faces, pasty as her own, lined up alongside, greedy of the morsel about to fall.

When the pinch of poverty threatens men and wolves, they grow long-faced. In these first lean days, a week of them, Ann 'Lisbeth's face lengthened a bit, too, and with the fuzz of yellow bangs

tucked well up under her not so decent black hat, crinkles came out about her eyes.

Nights she supped in a family-entrance café beneath her room—veal stew and a glass of beer.

She would sit over it, not unpleasantly muzzy. She slept of nights now, and not so rigidly.

Then followed a week of lesser department stores as she worked her way down-town, of offices tucked dingily behind lithograph and small-ware shops, and even an ostrich-feather loft, with a "Curlers Wanted" sign hung out.

In what school does the great army of industry earn its first experience? Who first employs the untaught hand? Upon Ann 'Lisbeth, untrained in any craft, it was as if the workaday world turned its back, nettled at a philistine.

Once she sat resting on a stoop beneath the sign of a woman's-aid bureau. She read it, but, somehow, her mind would not register. The calves of her legs and the line where her shoe cut into her heel were hurting.

She supped in the family-entrance café again—the bowl of veal stew and two glasses of beer.

Some days following, her very first venture out into the morning, she found employment—a small printing-shop off Sixth Avenue just below Twenty-third Street. A mere pocket in the wall, a machine champing in its plate-glass front.

VISITING-CARDS WHILE YOU WAIT
THIRTY-FIVE CENTS A HUNDRED

She entered.

"The sign says—'girl wanted,'"

A face peered down at her from a high chair behind the champing machine.

"'Goil wanted,' is what it says. Goil!"

"I—I ain't old," she faltered.

"Cut cards?"

"I— Try me."

"Five a week."

"Why—yes."

"Hang your coat and hat behind the sink."

Before noon, a waste of miscut cards about her, she cut her hand slightly, fumbling at the machine, and cried out.

"For the love of Mike—you want somebody to kiss it and make it well? Here's a quarter for your time. With them butter-fingers, you better get a job greasin' popcorn."

Out in the sun-washed streets the wind had hauled a bit. It cut as she bent into it. With her additional quarter, she still had two dollars and twenty cents, and that afternoon, in lower Sixth Avenue, at the instance of another small card fluttering out in the wind, she applied as dishwasher in a lunch-room and again obtained—this time at six dollars a week and suppers.

The Jefferson Market Lunch Room, thick with kicked-up sawdust and the fumes of hissing grease, was sunk slightly below the level of the sidewalk, a fitting retreat for the mole-like humanity that dined furtively at its counter. Men with too short coat-sleeves and collars turned up; women with beery eyes and uneven skirt-hems dank with the bilge-water of life's lower decks.

Lower Sixth Avenue is the abode of these shadows.

Where are they from, and whither going—these women without beauty, who walk the streets without handkerchiefs, but blubbering with too much or too little drink? What is the terrible riddle? Why, even as they blubber, are there women whose bodies have the quality of cream, slipping in between scented sheets?

Ann 'Lisbeth, hers not to argue, but accept, dallied with no such question. Behind the lunch-room, a sink of unwashed dishes rose to a mound. She plunged her hands into tepid water that clung to her like fuzz.

"Ugh!"

"Go to it!" said the proprietor, who wore a black flap over one eye. "Dey won't bite. If de grease won't cut, souse 'em wit' lye. Don't try to muzzle no breakage on me, neither, like the slut before you. I kin hear a cup crack."

"I won't," said Ann 'Lisbeth, a wave of the furry water slopping out and down her dress-front.

Followed four days spent in the grease-laden heat of the kitchen, the smell of strong foods, raw meat, and fish stews thick above the sink. She had moved farther down-town, against car fare; but because she talked now constantly in her sleep and often cried out, there were knockings from the opposite side of the partitions and oaths. For two evenings she sat until midnight in a small rear café, again pleasantly muzzy over three glasses of beer and the thick warmth of the room. Another night she carried home a small bottle, tucking it beneath her coat as she emerged to the street. She was grease-stained now, in spite of precautions, and her hat, with her

hair uncurled to sustain it, had settled down over her ears, grotesquely large.

The week raced with her funds. On the sixth day she paid out her last fifty cents for room-rent, and, without breakfast, filched her lunch from a half-eaten order of codfish balls returned to the kitchen.

Yes, reader; but who are you to turn away sickened and know no more of this? You who love to bask in life's smile, but shudder at its drool! A Carpenter did not sicken at a leper. He held out a hand.

That night, upon leaving, she asked for a small advance on her week's wage, retreating before the furiously stained apron-front and the one eye of the proprietor cast down upon her.

"Lay off! Lay off! Who done your bankin' last year? To-morrow's your day, less four bits for breakage. Speakin' o' breakage, if you drop your jacket, it 'll bust. Watch out! That pint won't last you overnight. Lay off!"

She reddened immediately, clapping her hand over the small protruding bottle in her pocket. She dared not return to her room, but sat out the night in a dark foyer behind a half-closed storm-door. No one found her out, and the wind could not reach her. Toward morning she even slept sitting. But the day following, weak and too soft for the lift, straining to remove the great dish-pan high with crockery from sink to table, she let slip, grasping for a new hold.

There was a crash and a splintered debris—plates that rolled like hoops to the four corners of the room, shivering as they landed; a great ringing ex-

plosion of heavy stoneware, and herself drenched with the webby water.

"O God!" she cried in immediate hysteria. "O God! O God!" and fell to her knees in a frenzy of clearing-up.

A raw-boned Minerva, a waitress with whom she had had no previous word, sprang to her succor, a big, red hand of mercy jerking her up from the debris.

"Clear out! He's across the bar. Beat it while the going's good. Your week's gone in breakage, anyways, and he'll split up the place when he comes. Clear out, girl, and here—for car fare."

Out in the street, her jacket not quite on and her hat clapped askew, Ann 'Lisbeth found herself quite suddenly scuttling down a side-street.

In her hand a dime burnt up into the palm.

For the first time in these weeks, except when her pint or the evening beer had vivified her, a warmth seemed to flow through Ann 'Lisbeth. Chilled, and her wet clothing clinging in at the knees, a fever nevertheless quickened her. She was crying as she walked, but not blubbering—spontaneous hot tears born of acute consciousness of pain.

A great shame at her smelling, grease-caked dress-front smote her, too, and she stood back in a doorway, scraping at it with a futile forefinger.

February had turned soft and soggy, the city streets running mud, and the damp insidious enough to creep through the warmth of human flesh. A day threatened with fog from East River had slipped, without the interim of dusk, into a heavy evening. Her clothing dried, but sitting in a small triangle of park in Grove Street, chill seized her

again, and, faint for food, but with nausea for it, she tucked her now empty pint bottle beneath the bench. She was crying incessantly, but her mind still seeming to revive. Her small black purse she drew out from her pocket. It had a collapsed look. Yet within were a sample of baby-blue cotton crêpe, a receipt from a dyeing-and-cleaning establishment, and a bit of pink chamois; in another compartment a small assortment of keys.

She fumbled among them, blind with tears. Once she drew out, peering forward toward a street-lamp to inspect it. It clinked as she touched it, a small metal tag ringing.

HOTEL LIBERTY

96

An hour Ann 'Lisbeth sat there, with the key in her lax hand. Finally she rubbed the pink chamois across her features and adjusted her hat, pausing to scrape again with forefinger at the front of her, and moved on through the gloom, the wind blowing her skirt forward.

She boarded a Seventh Avenue street-car, extracting the ten-cent piece from her purse with a great show of well-being, sat back against the carpet-covered, lengthwise seat, her red hands, with the cut forefinger bound in rag, folded over her waist.

At Fiftieth Street she alighted, the white lights of the whitest street in the world forcing down through the murk, and a theater crowd swarming to be turned from reality.

The incandescent sign of the Hotel Liberty jutted out ahead.

She did not pause. She was in and into an elevator even before a lackey turned to stare.

She found "Ninety-six" easily enough, inserting the key and opening the door upon darkness—a warm darkness that came flowing out scented. She found the switch, pressed it.

A lamp with a red shade sprang up and a center chandelier. A warm-toned, well-tufted room, hotel chromos well in evidence, but a turkey-red air of solid comfort.

Beyond, a white-tiled bathroom shining through the open door, and another room hinted at beyond that.

She dropped, even in her hat and jacket, against the divan piled with fat-looking satin cushions. Tears coursed out from her closed eyes, and she relaxed as if she would swoon to the luxury of the pillows, burrowing and letting them bulge up softly about her.

A half-hour she lay so in the warm bath of light, her little body so quickly fallen into vagrancy not without litheness beneath the moldy skirt.

Some time after eight she rose, letting the warm water in the bathroom lave over her hands, limbering them, and from a bottle of eau de Cologne in a small medicine-chest sprinkled herself freely and touched up the corners of her eyes with it. A thick robe of Turkish toweling hung from the bathroom door. She unhooked it, looping it over one arm.

A key scraped in the lock. From where she stood

a rigidity raced over Ann 'Lisbeth, locking her every limb in paralysis. Her mouth moved to open and would not.

The handle turned, and, with a sudden release of faculties, darting this way and that, as if at bay, she tore the white-enameled medicine-chest from its moorings, and, with a yell sprung somewhere from the primordial depths of her, stood with it swung to hurl.

The door opened and she lunged, then let it fall weakly and with a small crash.

The chambermaid, white with shock at that cry, dropped her burden of towels in the open doorway and fled. Ann 'Lisbeth fled, too, down the two flights of stairs her frenzy found out for her, and across the flare of Broadway.

The fog from East River was blowing in grandly as she ran into its tulle. It closed around and around her.

V

GOLDEN FLEECE

HOW saving a dispensation it is that men do not carry in their hearts perpetual ache at the pain of the world, that the body-thuds of the drink-crazed, beating out frantic strength against cell doors, cannot penetrate the beatitude of a mother bending, at that moment, above a crib. Men can sit in club windows while, even as they sit, are battle-fields strewn with youth dying, their faces in mud. While men are dining where there are mahogany and silver and the gloss of women's shoulders, are men with kick-marks on their shins, ice gluing shut their eyes, and lashed with gale to some ship-or-other's crow's-nest. Women at the opera, so fragrant that the senses swim, sit with consciousness partitioned against a sweating, shuddering woman in some forbidding, forbidden room, hacking open a wall to conceal something red-stained. One-half of the world does not know or care how the other half lives or dies.

When, one summer, July came in like desert wind, West Cabanne Terrace and that part of residential St. Louis that is set back in carefully conserved, grove-like lawns did not sip its iced limeades

with any the less refreshment because, down-town at the intersection of Broadway and West Street, a woman trundling a bundle of washing in an old perambulator suddenly keeled of heat, saliva running from her mouth-corners.

At three o'clock, that hour when so often a summer's day reaches its stilly climax and the heat-dance becomes a thing visible, West Cabanne Terrace and its kind slip into sheerest and crêpiest de Chine, click electric fans to third speed, draw green shades, and retire for siesta.

At that same hour, in the Popular Store, where Broadway and West Street intersect, one hundred and fifty salesgirls—jaded sentinels for a public that dares not venture down, loll at their counters and after the occasional shopper, relax deeper to limpidity.

At the jewelry counter, a crystal rectangle facing broadside the main entrance and the bleached and sun-grilled street without, Miss Lola Hassiebrock, salient among many and with Olympian certainty of self, lifted two Junoesque arms like unto the handles of a vase, held them there in the kind of rigidity that accompanies a yawn, and then let them flop.

"Oh-h-h-h, God bless my soul!" she said.

Miss Josie Beemis, narrowly constricted between shoulders that barely sloped off from her neck, with arms folded flat to her flat bosom and her back a hypothenuse against the counter, looked up.

"Watch out, Loo! I read in the paper where a man up in Alton got caught in the middle of one of those gaps and couldn't ungap."

Miss Hassiebrock batted at her lips and shuddered.

"It's my nerves, dearie. All the doctors say that nine gaps out of ten are nerves."

Miss Beemis hugged herself a bit flatter, looking out straight ahead into a parasol sale across the aisle.

"Enough sleep ain't such a bad cure for gaps," she said.

"I'll catch up in time, dearie; my foot's been asleep all day."

"Huh!"—sniffling so that her thin nose quirked sidewise. "I will now indulge in hollow laughter—"

"You can't, dearie," said Miss Hassiebrock, driven to vaudevillian extremities, "you're cracked."

"Well, I may be cracked, but my good name ain't."

A stiffening of Miss Hassiebrock took place, as if mere verbiage had suddenly flung a fang. From beneath the sternly and too starched white shirt-waist and the unwilted linen cravat wound high about her throat and sustained there with a rhine-stone horseshoe, it was as if a wave of color had started deep down, rushing up under milky flesh into her hair.

"Is that meant to be an in-sinuating remark, Josie?"

"'Tain't how it's meant; it's how it's took."

"There's some poor simps in this world, maybe right here in this store, ought to be excused from what they say because they don't know any better."

"I know this much: To catch the North End street-car from here, I don't have to walk every night down past the Stag Hotel to do it."

At that Miss Hassiebrock's ears, with the large pearl blobs in them, tingled where they peeped out

from the scallops of yellow hair, and she swallowed with a forward movement as if her throat had constricted.

"I—take the street-car where I darn please, and it's nobody's darn business."

"Sure it ain't! Only, if a poor working-girl don't want to make it everybody's darn business, she can't run around with the fast rich boys of this town and then get invited to help hem the altar-cloth."

"Anything I do in this town I'm not ashamed to do in broad daylight."

"Maybe; but just the samey, I notice the joy rides out to Claxton don't take place in broad daylight. I notice that 'tall, striking blonde' and Charley Cox's speed-party in the morning paper wasn't exactly what you'd call a 'daylight' affair."

"No, it wasn't; it was—my affair."

"Say, if you think a girl like you can run with the black sheep of every rich family in town and make a noise like a million dollars with the horsy way she dresses, it ain't my grave you're digging."

"Maybe if some of the girls in this store didn't have time to nose so much, they'd know why I can make them all look like they was caught out in the rain and not pressed the next morning. While they're snooping in what don't concern them I'm snipping. Snipping over my last year's black-and-white-checked jacket into this year's cutaway. If you girls had as much talent in your needle as you've got in your conversation, you might find yourselves somewheres."

"Maybe what you call 'somewheres' is what lots of us would call 'nowheres.'"

Miss Hassiebrock drew herself up and, from the

suzerainty of sheer height, looked down upon Miss Beemis there, so brown and narrow beside the friendship-bracelet rack.

"I'll have you know, Josie Beemis, that if every girl in this store watched her step like me, there'd be a darn sight less trouble in the world."

"I know you don't go beyond the life-line, Loo, but, gee! you—you do swim out some!"

"Little Loo knows her own depth, all righty."

"Not the way you're cuttin' up with Charley Cox."

Miss Hassiebrock lowered her flaming face to scrutinize a tray of rhinestone bar pins.

"I'd like to see any girl in this store turn down a bid with Charley Cox. I notice there are plenty of you go out to the Highland dances hoping to meet even his imitation."

"The rich boys that hang around the Stag and out to the Highlands don't get girls like us anywheres."

"I don't need them to get me anywhere. It's enough when a fellow takes me out that he can tuck me up in a six-cylinder and make me forget my stone-bruise. Give me a fellow that smells of gasolene instead of bay rum every time. Trolley-car Johnnies don't mean nothing in my life."

"You let John Simeon out of this conversation!"

"You let Charley Cox out!"

"Maybe he don't smell like a cleaned white glove, but John means something by me that's good."

"Well, since you're so darn smart, Josie Beemis, and since you got so much of the English language to spare, I'm going to tell you something. Three nights in succession, and I can prove it by the

crowd, Charley Cox has asked me to marry him. Begged me last night out at Claxton Inn, with Jess Turner and all that bunch along, to let them roust out old man Gerber there in Claxton and get married in poetry. Put that in your pipe and smoke it awhile, Josie; it may soothe your nerve."

"Y-aw," said Miss Beemis.

The day dwindled. Died.

At West Street, where Broadway intersects, the red sun at its far end settled redly and cleanly to sink like a huge coin into the horizon. The Popular Store emptied itself into this hot pink glow, scurried for the open street-car and, oftener than not, the overstuffed rear platform, nose to nose, breath to breath.

Fortunately the Popular Store took its semi-annual inventory of yards and not of souls. Such a stock-taking, that of the human hearts which beat from half after eight to six behind six floors of counters, would have revealed empty crannies, worn thin in places with the grind of routine. The eight-thirty-to-six business of muslin underwear, crash toweling, and skirt-binding. The great middle class of shoppers who come querulous with bunions and babies. The strap-hanging homeward ride. Supper, but usually within range of the range that boils it. The same smells of the same foods. The cinematograph or front-stoop hour before bed. Or, if Love comes, and he will not be gainsaid, a bit of wooing at the fountain—the soda-fountain. But even he, oftener than not, comes moist-handed, and in a ready-tied tie. As if that matters, and yet

somehow, it does. Leander wore none, or had he, would have worn it flowing. Then bed, and the routine of its unfolding and coaxing the pillow from beneath the iron clamp. An alarm-clock crashing through the stuff of dreams. Coffee within reach of the range. Another eight-thirty-to-six reality of muslin underwearing, crash toweling, and skirt-binding.

But, not given to self-inventory, the Popular Store emptied itself with that blessed elasticity of spirit which, unappalled, stretches to to-morrows as they come.

At Ninth Street Miss Lola Hassiebrock loosed her arm where Miss Beemis had linked into it. Wide-shouldered and flat-hipped, her checked suit so pressed that the lapels lay entirely flat to the swell of her bosom, her red sailor-hat well down over her brow, and the high, swathing cravat rising to inclose her face like a wimple, she was Fashion's apotheosis in tailor-made mood. When Miss Hassiebrock walked, her skirt, concealing yet revealing an inch glimmer of gray-silk stocking above gray-suède spats, allowed her ten inches of stride. She turned now, sidestepping within those ten inches.

"See you to-morrow, Josie."

"Ain't you taking the car?"

"No, dearie," said Miss Hassiebrock, stepping down to cross the street; "you take it, but not for keeps."

And so, walking southward on Ninth Street in a sartorial glory that was of her own making-over from last season, even St. Louis, which at the stroke of six rushes so for the breeze of its side yards,

leaving darkness to creep into down-town streets that are as deserted as cañons, turned its feminine head to bear in mind the box-plaited cutaway, the male eye appraising its approval with bold, even quirking eye.

Through this, and like Diana, who, so aloof from desire, walked in the path of her own splendor, strode Miss Hassiebrock, straight and forward of eye. Past the Stag Hotel, in an aisle formed by lounging young bloods and a curb lined with low, long-snouted motor-cars, the gaze beneath the red sailor and above the high, horsy stock a bit too rigidly conserved.

Slightly by, the spoken word and the whistled innuendo followed her like a trail of bubbles in the wake of a flying-fish. A youth still wearing a fraternity pin pretended to lick his downy chops. The son of the president of the Mound City Oil Company emitted a long, amorous whistle. Willie Waxter—youngest scion, scalawag, and scorcher of one of the oldest families—jammed down his motor-goggles from the visor of his cap, making the feint of pursuing. Mr. Charley Cox, of half a hundred first-page exploits, did pursue, catching up slightly breathless.

"What's your hurry, honey?"

She spun about, too startled.

"Charley Cox! Well, of all the nerve! Why didn't you scare me to death and be done with it?"

"Did I scare you, sweetness? Cross my heart, I didn't mean to."

"Well, I should say you did!"

He linked his arm into hers.

"Come on; I'll buy you a drink."

She unlinked.

"Honest, can't a girl go home from work in this town without one of you fellows getting fresh with her?"

"All right, then; I'll buy you a supper. The car is back there, and we'll shoot out to the inn. What do you say? I feel like a house afire this evening, kiddo. What does your speedometer register?"

"Charley, aren't you tired painting this old town yet? Ain't there just nothing will bring you to your senses? Honest, this morning's papers are a disgrace. You—you won't catch me along again."

He slid his arm, all for ingratiating, back into hers.

"Come now, honey; you know you like me for my speed."

She would not smile.

"Honest, Charley, you're the limit."

"But you like me just the same. Now don't you, Loo?"

She looked at him sidewise.

"You've been drinking, Charley."

He felt of his face.

"Not a drop, Loo. I need a shave, that's all."

"Look at your stud—loose."

He jammed a diamond whip curling back upon itself into his maroon scarf. He was slightly heavy, so that his hands dimpled at the knuckle, and above the soft collar, joined beneath the scarf with a gold-bar pin, his chin threatened but did not repeat itself.

"I got to go now, Charley; there's a North End car coming."

"Aw, now, sweetness, what's the idea? Didn't you walk down here to pick me up?"

An immediate flush stung her face.

"Well, of all the darn conceit! Can't a girl walk down to the loop to catch her car and stretch her legs after she's been cooped up all day, without a few of you boys throwing a bouquet or two at yourselves?"

"I got to hand it you, Loo; when you walk down this street, you make every girl in town look warmed over."

"Do you like it, Charley? It's that checked jacket I bought at Hamlin's sale last year made over."

"Say, it's classy! You look like all the money in the world, honey."

"Huh, two yards of coat-lining, forty-four cents, and Ida Bell's last year's office-hat reblocked, sixty-five."

"You're the show-piece of the town, all right. Come on; let's pick up a crowd and muss-up Claxton Road a little."

"I meant what I said, Charley. After the cuttings-up of last night and the night before I'm quits. Maybe Charley Cox can afford to get himself talked about because he's Charley Cox, but a girl like me with a job to hold down, and the way ma and Ida Bell were sitting up in their nightgowns, green around the gills, when I got home last night—nix! I'm getting myself talked about, if you want to know it, running with—your gang, Charley."

"I'd like to see anybody let out so much as a grunt about you in front of me. A fellow can't do any more, honey, to show a girl where she stands with him than ask her to marry him—now can he? If I'd have had my way last night, I'd—"

"You was drunk when you asked me, Charley."

"You mean you got cold feet?"

"Thank God, I did!"

"I don't blame you, girl. You might do worse—but not much."

"That's what you'd need for your finishing-touch, a girl like me dragging you down."

"You mean pulling me up."

"Yes, maybe, if you didn't have a cent."

"I'd have enough sense then to know better than to ask you, honey. You 'ain't got that fourteen-carat look in your eye for nothing. You're the kind that's going to bring in a big fish, and I wish it to you."

"Lots you know."

"Come on; let me ride you around the block, then."

"If—if you like my company so much, can't you just take a walk with me or come out and sit on our steps awhile?"

"Lord, girl, Flamm Avenue is hot enough to fry my soul to-night!"

"We can't all have fathers that live in thirty-room houses out in Kingsmoreland Place."

"Thank God for that! I sneaked home this morning to change my clothes, and thought maybe I'd got into somebody's mausoleum by mistake."

"Was—was your papa around, Charley?"

"In the library, shut up with old man Brookes."

"Did he—did he see the morning papers? You know what he said last time, Charley, when the motor-cycle cop chased you down an embankment."

"Honey, if my old man was to carry out every threat he utters, I'd be disinherited, murdered, hong-

konged, shanghaied, and cremated every day in the year."

"I got to go now, Charley."

"Not let a fellow even spin you home?"

"You know I want to, Charley, but—but it don't do you any good, boy, being seen with me in that joy-wagon of yours. It—it don't do you any good, Charley, ever—ever being seen with me."

"There's nothing or nobody in this town can hurt my reputation, honey, and certainly not my ace-spot girl. Turn your mind over, and telephone down for me to come out and pick you up about eight."

"Don't hit it up to-night, Charley. Can't you go home one evening?"

He juggled her arm.

"You're a nice little girl, all righty."

"There's my car."

He elevated her by the elbow to the step, swinging up half-way after her to drop a coin into the box.

"Take care of this little lady there, conductor, and don't let your car skid."

"Oh, Charley—silly!"

She forced her way into the jammed rear platform, the sharp brim of the red sailor creating an area for her.

"S'long, Charley!"

"S'long, girl!"

Wedged there in the moist-faced crowd, she looked after him, at his broad back receding. An inclination to cry pressed at her eyeballs.

Flamm Avenue, which is treeless and built up for its entire length with two-story, flat-roofed build-

ings, stares, window for window, stoop for stoop, at its opposite side, and, in summer, the strip of asphalt street, unshaded and lying naked to the sun, gives off such an effluvium of heat and hot tar that the windows are closed to it and night descends like a gas-mask to the face.

Opening the door upon the Hassiebrock front room, convertible from bed- to sitting-room by the mere erect-position-stand of the folding-bed, a wave of this tarry heat came flowing out, gaseous, sickening. Miss Hassiebrock entered with her face wry, made a diagonal cut of the room, side-stepping a patent rocker and a table laid out with knickknacks on a lace mat, slammed closed two windows, and, turning inward, lifted off her hat, which left a brand across her forehead and had plastered down her hair in damp scallops.

"Whew!"

"Lo-o, that you?"

"Yes, ma."

"Come out to your supper. I'll warm up the kohlrabi."

Miss Hassiebrock strode through a pair of chromatic portières, with them swinging after her, and into an unlit kitchen, gray with dusk. A table drawn out center and within range of the gas-range was a blotch in the gloom, three figures surrounding it with arms that moved vaguely among a litter of dishes.

"I wish to Heaven somebody in this joint would remember to keep those front windows shut!"

Miss Ida Bell Hassiebrock, at the right of the table, turned her head so that, against the window, her profile, somewhat thin, cut into the gloom.

"There's a lot of things I wish around here," she said, without a ripple to her lips.

"Hello, ma!"

"I'll warm up the kohlrabi, Loo."

Mrs. Hassiebrock, in the green black of a cotton umbrella and as sparse of frame, moved around to the gas-range, scraping a match and dragging a pot over the blue flame.

"Never mind, ma; I ain't hungry."

At the left of the table Genevieve Hassiebrock, with thirteen's crab-like silhouette of elbow, rigid plaits, and nose still hitched to the star of her nativity, wound an exceedingly long arm about Miss Hassiebrock's trim waist-line.

"I got B in de-portment to-day, Loo. You owe me the wear of your spats Sunday."

Miss Hassiebrock squeezed the hand at her waist.

"All right, honey. Cut Loo a piece of bread."

"Gussie Flint's mother scalded her leg with the wash-boiler."

"Did she? Aw!"

Mrs. Hassiebrock came then, limping around, tilting the contents of the steaming pot to a plate.

"Sit down, ma; don't bother."

Miss Hassiebrock drew up, pinning a fringed napkin that stuck slightly in the unfolding across her shining expanse of shirtwaist. Broke a piece of bread. Dipped.

Silence.

"Paula Krausnick only got C in de-portment. When the monitor passed the basin, she dipped her sponge soppin'-wet."

"Anything new, ma?"

Mrs. Hassiebrock, now at the sink, swabbed a dish with gray water.

"My feet's killin' me," she said.

Miss Ida Bell, who wore her hair in a coronet wound twice round her small head, crossed her knife and fork on her plate, folded her napkin, and tied it with a bit of blue ribbon.

"I think it's a shame, ma, the way you keep thumping around in your stocking feet like this was backwoods."

"I can't get my feet in shoes—the joints—"

"You thump around as much as you darn please, ma. If Ida Bell don't like the looks of you, let her go home with some of her swell stenog friends. You let your feet hurt you any old way you want 'em to. I'm going to buy you some arnica. Pass the kohlrabi."

"Well, my swell 'stenog friends,' as you call them, keep themselves self-respecting girls without getting themselves talked about, and that's more than I can say of my sister. If ma had the right kind of gumption with you, she'd put a stop to it, all right."

Mrs. Hassiebrock leaned her tired head sidewise into the moist palm of her hand.

"She's beyond me and the days when a slipper could make her mind. I wisht to God there was a father to rule youse!"

"I tell you, ma—mark my word for it—if old man Brookes ever finds out I'm sister to any of the crowd that runs with Charley Cox and Willie Waxter and those boys whose fathers he's lawyer for, it 'll queer me for life in that office—that's what it will. A girl that's been made confidential stenographer after

only one year in an office to have to be afraid, like I am, to pick up the morning's paper."

"Paula Krausnick's lunch was wrapped in the paper where Charley Cox got pinched for speedin'—speedin'—speedin'—"

"Shut up, Genevieve! Just don't you let my business interfere with yours, Ida Bell. Brookes don't know you're on earth outside of your dictation-book. Take it from me, I bet he wouldn't know you if he met you on the street."

"That's about all you know about it! If you found yourself confidential stenographer to the biggest lawyer in town, he'd know you, all right—by your loud dressing. A blind man could see you coming."

"Ma, are you going to stand there and let her talk to me thataway? I notice she's willing to borrow my loud shirtwaists and my loud gloves and my loud collars."

"If ma had more gumption with you, maybe things would be different."

Mrs. Hassiebrock limped to the door, dangling a pail.

"I 'ain't got no more strength against her. My ears won't hold no more. I'm taking this hot oil down to Mrs. Flint's scalds. She's beyond my control, and the days when a slipper could make her mind. I wisht to God there was a father! I wisht to God!"

Her voice trailed off and down a rear flight of stairs.

"Yes*sir*," resumed Miss Hassiebrock, her voice twanging in her effort at suppression, "I notice

you're pretty willing to borrow some of my loud dressing when you get a bid once in a blue moon to take a boat-ride up to Alton with that sad-faced Roy Brownell. If Charley didn't have a cent to his name and a harelip, he'd make Roy Brownell look like thirty cents."

"If Roy Brownell was Charley Cox, I'd hate to leave him laying around loose where you could get your hands on him."

"Genevieve, you run out and play."

"If—if you keep running around till all hours of the night, with me and ma waiting up for you, kicking up rows and getting your name insinuated in the newspapers as 'the tall, handsome blonde,' I—I'm going to throw up my job, I am, and you can pay double your share for the running of this flat. Next thing we know, with that crowd that don't mean any good to you, this family is going to find itself with a girl in trouble on its hands."

"You—"

"And if you want to know it, and if I wasn't somebody's confidential stenographer, I could tell you that you're on the wrong scent. Boys like Charley Cox don't mean good by your kind of a girl. If you're not speedy, you look it, and that's almost the same as inviting those kind of boys to—"

Miss Lola Hassiebrock sprang up then, her hand coming down in a small crash to the table.

"You cut out that talk in front of that child!"

Thus drawn into the picture, Genevieve, at thirteen, crinkled her face for not uncalculating tears.

"In this house it's fuss and fuss and fuss. Other

children can go to the 'movies' after supper, only me-e-e—"

"Here, honey; Loo's got a dime for you."

"Sending that child out along your own loose ways, instead of seeing to it she stays home to help ma do the dishes!"

"I'll do the dishes for ma."

"It's bad enough for one to have the name of being gay without starting that child running around nights with—"

"Ida Bell!"

"You dry up, Ida Bell! I'll do what I pl—ease with my di—uhm—di—uhm."

"If you say another word about such stuff in front of that child, I'll—"

"Well, if you don't want her to hear what she sees with her eyes all around her, come into the bedroom, then, and I can tell you something that 'll bring you to your senses."

"What you can tell me I don't want to hear."

"You're afraid."

"I am, am I?"

"Yes."

With a wrench of her entire body, Miss Lola Hassiebrock was across the room at three capacity strides, swung open a door there, and stood, head flung up and pressing back tears, her lips turned inward.

"All right, then—tell—"

After them, the immediately locked door resisting, Genevieve fell to batting the panels.

"Let me in! Let me in! You're fussin' about your beaux. Ray Brownell has a long face, and

Charley Cox has a red face—red face—red face! Let me in! In!"

After a while the ten-cent piece rolled from her clenched and knocking fist, scuttling and settling beneath the sink. She rescued it and went out, lickety-clapping down the flight of rear stairs.

Silence descended over that kitchen, and a sooty dusk that almost obliterated the table, drawn out and cluttered after the manner of those who dine frowsily; the cold stove, its pots cloying, and a sink piled high with a task whose only ending is from meal to meal.

Finally that door swung open again; the wide-shouldered, slim-hipped silhouette of Miss Hassiebrock moved swiftly and surely through the kind of early darkness, finding out for itself a wall telephone hung in a small patch of hallway separating kitchen and front room. Her voice came tight, as if it were a tense coil in her throat that she held back from bursting into hysteria.

"Give me Olive, two-one-o." The toe of her boot beat a quick tattoo. "Stag? . . . Say, get me Charley Cox. He's out in front or down in the grill or somewhere around. Page him quick! Important!" She grasped the nozzle of the instrument as she waited, breathing into it with her head thrown back. "Hello—Charley? That you? It's me. Loo . . . *Loo!* Are you deaf, honey? What you doing? . . . Oh, I got the blues, boy; honest I have. Blue as a cat. . . . I don't know—just the indigoes. Nothing much. Ain't lit up, are you, honey? . . . Sure I will. Don't bring a crowd. Just you and me, I'll walk down to Gessler's drug-store

and you can pick me up there. . . . Quit your kidding. . . . Ten minutes. Yeh. Good-by."

Claxton Inn, slightly outside the city limits and certain of its decorums, stands back in a grove off a macadamized highway that is so pliant to tire that of summer nights, with tops thrown back and stars sown like lavish grain over a close sky and to a rushing breeze that presses the ears like an eager whisper, motor-cars, wild to catch up with the horizon, tear out that road—a lightning-streak of them—fearing neither penal law nor Dead Man's Curve.

Slacking only to be slacked, cars dart off the road and up a gravel driveway that encircles Claxton Inn like a lariat swung, then park themselves among the trees, lights dimmed. Placid as a manse without, what was once a private and now a public house maintains through lowered lids its discreet white-frame exterior, shades drawn, and only slightly revealing the parting of lace curtains. It is rearward where what was formerly a dining-room that a huge, screened-in veranda, very whitely lighted, juts suddenly out, and a showy hallway, bordered in potted palms, leads off that. Here Discretion dares lift her lids to rove the gravel drive for who comes there.

In a car shaped like a motor-boat and as low to the ground Mr. Charley Cox turned in and with a great throttling and choking of engine drew up among the dim-eyed monsters of the grove and directly alongside an eight-cylinder roadster with a snout like a greyhound.

"Aw, Charley, I thought you promised you wasn't going to stop!"

"Honey, sweetness, I just never was so dry."

Miss Hassiebrock laid out a hand along his arm, sitting there in the quiet car, the trees closing over them.

"There's Yiddles Farm a little farther out, Charley; let's stop there for some spring water."

He was peeling out of his gauntlets, and cramming them into spacious side pockets.

"Water, honey, can wash me, but it can't quench me."

"No high jinks to-night, though, Charley?"

"Sure—no."

They high-stepped through the gloom, and finally, with firmer step, up the gravel walk and into the white-lighted, screened-in porch.

Three waiters ran toward their entrance. A woman with a bare V of back facing them, and three plumes that dipped to her shoulders, turned square in her chair.

"Hi, Charley. Hi, Loo!"

"H'lo, Jess!"

They walked, thus guided by two waiters, through a light *confetti* of tossed greetings, sat finally at a table half concealed by an artificial palm.

"You don't feel like sitting with Jess and the crowd, Loo?"

"Charley, hasn't that gang got you into enough mix-ups?"

"All right, honey; anything your little heart desires."

She leaned on her elbows across the table from

him, smiling and twirling a great ring of black onyx round her small finger.

"Love me?"

"Br-r-r—to death!"

"Sure?"

"Sure. What 'll you have, hon?"

"I don't care."

"Got any my special Gold Top on ice for me, George? Good. Shoot me a bottle and a special layout of *hors-d'œuvre*. How's that, sweetness?"

"Yep."

"Poor little girl," he said, patting the black onyx, "with the bad old blues! I know what they are, honey; sometimes I get crazy with 'em myself."

Her lips trembled.

"It's you makes me blue, Charley."

"Now, now; just don't worry that big, nifty head of yours about me."

"The—the morning papers and all. I—I just hate to see you going so to—to the dogs, Charley—a—fellow like you—with brains."

"I'm a bad egg, girl, and what you going to do about it? I was raised like one, and I'll die like one."

"You ain't a bad egg. You just never had a chance. You been killed with coin."

"Killed with coin! Why, Loo, do you know, I haven't had to ask my old man for a cent since my poor old granny died five years ago and left me a world of money? While he's been piling it up like the Rocky Mountains I've been getting down to rock-bottom. What would you say, sweetness, if I told you I was down to my last few thousands? Time to touch my old man, eh?"

He drank off his first glass with a quaff, laughing and waving it empty before her face to give off its perfume.

"My old man is going to wake up in a minute and find me on his checking-account again. Charley boy better be making connections with headquarters or he won't find himself such a hit with the niftiest doll in town, eh?"

"Charley, you—you haven't run through those thousands and thousands and thousands the papers said you got from your granny that time?"

"It was slippery, hon; somebody buttered it."

"Charley, Charley, ain't there just no limit to your wildness?"

"You're right, girl; I've been killed with coin. My old man's been too busy all these years sitting out there in that marble tomb in Kingsmoreland biting the rims off pennies to hold me back from the devil. Honey, that old man, even if he is my father, didn't know no more how to raise a boy like me than that there salt-cellar. Every time I got in a scrape he bought me out of it, filled up the house with rough talk, and let it go at that. It's only this last year, since he's short on health, that he's kicking up the way he should have before it got too late. My old man never used to talk it out with me, honey. He used to lash it out. I got a twelve-year-old welt on my back now, high as your finger. Maybe it 'll surprise you, girl, but now, since he can't welt me up any more, me and him don't exchange ten words a month."

"Did—did he hear about last night, Charley? You know what came out in the paper about mak-

ing a new will if—if you ever got pulled in again for rough-housing?"

"Don't you worry that nifty head of yours about my old man ever making a new will. He's been pulling that ever since they fired me from the academy for lighting a cigarette with a twenty-dollar bill."

"Charley!"

"Next to taking it with him, he'll leave it to me before he'll see a penny go out of the family. I've seen his will, hon."

"Charley, you—you got so much good in you. The way you sent that wooden leg out to poor old lady Guthrie. The way you made Jimmy Ball go home, and the blind-school boys and all. Why can't you get yourself on the right track where you belong, Charley? Why don't you clear—out—West where it's clean?"

"I used to have that idea, Loo. West, where a fellow's got to stand on his own. Why, if I'd have met a girl like you ten years ago, I'd have made you the baby doll of the Pacific Coast. I like you, Loo. I like your style and the way you look like a million dollars. When a fellow walks into a café with you he feels like he's wearing the Hope diamond. Maybe the society in this town has given me the cold shoulder, but I'd like to see any of the safety-first boys walk in with one that's got you beat. That's what I think of you, girl."

"Aw, now, you're lighting up. Charley. That's four glasses you've taken."

"Thought I was kidding you last night—didn't you—about wedding-bells?"

"You were lit up."

"I know. You're going to watch your step, little girl, and I don't know as I blame you. You can get plenty of boys my carat, and a lot of other things thrown in I haven't got to offer you."

"As if I wouldn't like you, Charley, if you were dead broke!"

"Of course you would! There, there, girl, I don't blame any of you for feathering your nest." He was flushed now and above the soft collar his face had relaxed into a not easily controllable smile. "Feather your nest, girl; you got the looks to do it. It's a far cry from Flamm Avenue to where a classy girl like you can land herself if she steers right. And I wish it to you, girl; the best isn't good enough."

"I—I dare you to ask me again, Charley!"

"Ask what?"

"You know. Throw your head up the way you do when you mean what you say and—ask."

He was wagging his head now insistently, but pinioning his gaze with the slightly glassy stare of those who think none too clearly.

"Honest, I don't know, beauty. What's the idea?"

"Didn't you say yourself—Gerber, out here in Claxton that—magistrate that marries you in verse—"

"By gad, I did!"

"Well—I—I—dare you to ask me again, Charley."

He leaned forward.

"You game, girl?"

"Sure."

"No kidding?"

"Try me."

"I'm serious, girl."

"So'm I."

"There's Jess over there can get us a special license from his brother-in-law. Married in verse in Claxton sounds good to me, honey."

"But not—the crowd, Charley; just you—and—"

"How 're we going to get the license, honey, this time of night without Jess? Let's make it a million-dollar wedding. We're not ashamed of nobody or nothing."

"Of course not, Charley."

"Now, you're sure, honey? You're drawing a fellow that went to the dogs before he cut his canines."

"You're not all to the canines yet, Charley."

"I may be a black sheep, honey, but, thank God, I got my golden fleece to offer you!"

"You're not—black."

"You should worry, girl! I'm going to make you the million-dollar baby doll of this town, I am. If they turn their backs, we'll dazzle 'em from behind. I'm going to buy you every gewgaw this side of the Mississippi. I'm going to show them a baby doll that can make the high-society bunch in this town look like Subway sports. Are you game, girl? Now! Think well! Here goes. Jess!"

"Charley—I— You—"

"Jess—over here! Quick!"

"Charley—honey—"

At eleven o'clock a small, watery moon cut through a sky that was fleecily clouded—a swift moon that rode fast as a ship. It rode over but did not light

Squire Gerber's one-and-a-half-storied, weathered-gray, and set-slightly-in-a-hollow house on Claxton countryside.

Three motor-cars, their engines chugging out into wide areas of stillness, stood processional at the curb. A red hall light showed against the door-pane and two lower-story windows were widely illuminated.

Within that room of chromos and the cold horse-hair smell of unaired years, silence, except for the singing of three gas-jets, had momentarily fallen, a dozen or so flushed faces, grotesquely sobered, staring through the gaseous fog, the fluttering lids of a magistrate whose lips habitually fluttered, just lifting from his book.

A hysterical catch of breath from Miss Vera de Long broke the ear-splitting silence. She reached out, the three plumes dipping down the bare V of her back, for the limp hand of the bride.

"Gawd bless you, dearie; it's a big night's work!"

In the tallest part of St. Louis, its busiest thoroughfares inclosing it in a rectangle, the Hotel Sherman, where traveling salesmen with real alligator bags and third-finger diamonds habitually shake their first Pullman dust, rears eighteen stories up through and above an aeriality of soft-coal smoke, which fits over the rim of the city like a skull-cap.

In the Louis Quinze, gilt-bedded, gilt-framed, gilt-edged bridal-suite *de luxe* on the seventeenth floor, Mrs. Charley Cox sat rigid enough and in shirt-waisted incongruity on the lower curl of a gilt divan that squirmed to represent the letter S.

"Charley—are you—sorry?"

He wriggled out of his dust-coat, tossing it on the gilt-canopied bed and crossed to her, lifting off her red sailor.

"Now that's a fine question for a ten-hours' wifey to ask her hubby, ain't it? Am I sorry, she asks me before the wedding crowd has turned the corner. Lord, honey, I never expected anything like you to happen to me!"

She stroked his coat-sleeve, mouthing back tears.

"Now everybody 'll say—you're a goner—for sure—marrying a—Popular Store girl."

"If anybody got the worst of this bargain, it's my girl."

"My own boy," she said, still battling with tears.

"You drew a black sheep, honey, but I say again and again, 'Thank God, you drew one with golden fleece!'"

"That—that's the trouble, Charley—there's just no way to make a boy with money know you married him for any other reason."

"I'm not blaming you, honey. Lord! what have I got besides money to talk for me?"

"Lots. Why—like Jess says, Charley, when you get to squaring your lips and jerking up your head, there's nothing in the world you can't do that you set out to do."

"Well, I'm going to set out to make the stiff-necks of this town turn to look at my girl, all right. I'm going to buy you a chain of diamonds that 'll dazzle their eyes out; I'm—"

"Charley, Charley, that's not what I want, boy.

Now that I've got you, there ain't a chain of diamonds on earth I'd turn my wrist for."

"Yes, there is, girl; there's a string of pear-shaped ones in—"

"I want you to buck up, honey; that's the finest present you can give me. I want you to buck up like you didn't have a cent to your name. I want you to throw up your head the way you do when you mean business, and show that Charley Cox, without a cent to his name, would be—"

"Would be what, honey?"

"A winner. You got brains, Charley—if only you'd have gone through school and shown them. If you'd only have taken education, Charley, and not got fired out of all the academies, my boy would beat 'em all. Lord! boy, there's not a day passes over my head I don't wish for education. That's why I'm so crazy my little sister Genevieve should get it. I'd have took to education like a fish to water if I'd have had the chance, and there you were, Charley, with every private school in town and passed 'em up."

"I know, girl, just looks like every steer I gave myself was the wrong steer till it was too late to get in right again. Bad egg, I tell you, honey."

"Too late! Why, Charley—and you not even thirty-one yet? With your brains and all—too late! You make me laugh. If only you will—why, I'm game to go out West, Charley, on a ranch, where you can find your feet and learn to stand on them. You got stuff in you, you have. Jess Turner says you was always first in school, and when you set your jaw there wasn't nothing you couldn't get on

top of. If you'd have had a mother and—and a father that wasn't the meanest old man in town, dear, and had known how to raise a hot-headed boy like you, you'd be famous now instead of notorious—that's what you'd be."

He patted her yellow hair, tilting her head back against his arm, pinching her cheeks together and kissing her puckered mouth.

"Dream on, honey. I like you crazy, too."

"But, honey, I—"

"You married this millionaire kid, and, bless your heart, he's going to make good by showing you the color of his coin!"

"Charley!"

She sprang back from the curve of his embrace, unshed tears immediately distilled.

"Why, honey—I didn't mean it that way! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. What I meant was—'sh-h-h-h, Loo—all I meant was, it's coming to you. Where'd the fun be if I couldn't make this town point up its ears at my girl? Nobody knows any better than your hubby what his Loo was cut out for. She was cut out for queening it, and I'm going to see that she gets what's her due. Wouldn't be surprised if the papers have us already. Let's see what we'll give them with their coffee this morning."

He unfolded his fresh sheet, shaking it open with one hand and still holding her in the cove of his arm.

"Guess we missed the first edition, but they'll get us sure."

She peered at the sheet over his shoulder, her cheek against his and still sobbing a bit in her throat.

The jerking of her breath stopped then; in fact, it was as if both their breathing had let down with the oneness of a clock stopped.

It was she who moved first, falling back from him, her mouth dropping open slightly.

He let the paper fall between his wide-spread knees, the blood flowing down from his face and seeming to leave him leaner.

"Charley—Charley—darling!"

"My—poor old man!" he said in a voice that might have been his echo in a cave.

"He—his heart must have give out on him, Charley, while he slept in the night."

"My—poor—old—man!"

She stretched out her hand timidly to his shoulder.

"Charley—boy—my poor boy!"

He reached up to cover her timid touch, still staring ahead, as if a mental apathy had clutched him.

"He died like—he—lived. Gad—it's—tough!"

"It—it wasn't your fault, darling. God forgive me for speaking against the dead, but—everybody knows he was a hard man, Charley—the way he used to beat you up instead of showing you the right way. Poor old man, I guess he didn't know—"

"My old man—dead!"

She crept closer, encircling his neck, and her wet cheek close to his dry one.

"He's at peace now, darling—and all your sins are forgiven—like you forgive—his."

His lips were twisting.

"There was no love lost there, girl. God knows there wasn't. There was once nine months we didn't speak. Never could have been less between a father

and son. You see he—he hated me from the start, because my mother died hating him—but—*dead*—that's another matter. Ain't it, girl—ain't it?"

She held her cheek to his so that her tears veered out of their course, zigzagging down to his waistcoat, stroked his hair, placing her rich, moist lips to his eyelids.

"My darling! My darling boy! My own poor darling!"

Sobs rumbled up through him, the terrific sobs that men weep.

"You—married a rotter, Loo—that couldn't even live decent with his—old man. He—died like a dog—alone."

"'Sh-h-h, Charley! Just because he's dead don't mean he was any better while he lived."

"I'll make it up to you, girl, for the rotter I am. I'm a rich man now, Loo."

"'Sh-h-h!"

"I'll show you, girl. I can make somebody's life worth living. I'm going to do something for somebody to prove I'm worth the room I occupy, and that somebody's going to be you, Loo. I'm going to build you a house that 'll go down in the history of this town. I'm going to wind you around with pearls to match that skin of yours. I'm going to put the kind of clothes on you that you read of queens wearing. I've seen enough of the kind of meanness money can breed. I'm going to make those Romans back there look like pikers. I'm—"

She reached out, placing her hand pat across his mouth, and, in the languid air of the room, shuddering so that her lips trembled.

"Charley—for God's sake—it—it's a sin to talk that way!"

"O God, I know it, girl! I'm all muddled—muddled."

He let his forehead drop against her arm, and in the long silence that ensued she sat there, her hand on his hair.

The roar of traffic, seventeen stories below, came up through the open windows like the sound of high seas, and from where she sat, staring out between the pink-brocade curtains, it was as if the close July sky dipped down to meet that sea, and space swam around them.

"O God!" he said, finally. "What does it all mean—this living and dying—"

"Right living, Charley, makes dying take care of itself."

"God! how he must have died, then! Like a dog—alone."

"'Sh-h-h, Charley; don't get to thinking."

Without raising his head, he reached up to stroke her arm.

"Honey, you're shivering."

"No-o."

"Everything's all right, girl. What's the use me trying to sham it's not. I—I'm bowled over for the minute, that's all. If it had to come, after all, it—it came right for my girl. With that poor old man out there, honey, living alone like a dog all these years, it's just like putting him from one marble mausoleum out there on Kingsmoreland Place into one where maybe he'll rest easier. He's better off, Loo, and—we—are, too. Hand me the paper,

honey; I—want to see—just how my—poor old man —breathed out."

Then Mrs. Cox rose, her face distorted with holding back tears, her small high heels digging into and breaking the newspaper at his feet.

"Charley—Charley—"

"Why, girl, what?"

"You don't know it, but my sister, Charley—Ida Bell!"

"Why, Loo, I sent off the message to your mama. They know it by now."

"Charley—Charley—"

"Why, honey, you're full of nerves! You mustn't go to pieces like this. Your sister's all right. I sent them a—"

"You—you don't know, Charley. My sister— I swore her an oath on my mother's prayer-book. I wouldn't tell, but, now that he's dead, that—lets me out. The will—Charley, he made it yesterday, like he always swore he would the next time you got your name on the front page."

"Made what, honey? Who?"

"Charley, can't you understand? My sister Ida Bell and Brookes—your father's lawyer. She's his private stenographer—Brookes's, honey. You know that. But she told me last night, honey, when I went home. You're cut off, Charley! Your old man sent for Brookes yesterday at noon. I swear to God, Charley! My sister Ida Bell she broke her confidence to tell me. He's give a million alone to the new college hospital. Half a million apiece to four or five old people's homes. He's give his house to the city with the art-gallery. He's even looked

up relations to give to. He kept his word, honey, that all those years he kept threatening. He—he kept it the day before he died. He must have had a hunch—your poor old man. Charley darling, don't look like that! If your wife ain't the one to break it to you you're broke, who is? You're not 'Million Dollar Charley' no more, honey. You're just my own Charley, with his chance come to him—you hear, *my* Charley, with the best thing that ever happened to him in his life happening right now."

He regarded her as if trying to peer through something opaque, his hands spread rather stupidly on his wide knees.

"Huh?"

"Charley, Charley, can't you understand? A dollar, that puts him within the law, is all he left you."

"He never did. He never did. He wouldn't. He couldn't. He never did. I saw—his will. I'm the only survivor. I saw his will."

"Charley, I swear to God! I swear as I'm standing here you're cut off. My sister copied the new will on her typewriter three times and seen the sealed and stamped one. He kept his word. He wrote it with his faculties and witnesses. We're broke, Charley—thank God, we're flat broke!"

"He did it? He did it? My old man did it?"

"As sure as I'm standing here, Charley."

He fell to blinking rapidly, his face puckering to comprehend.

"I never thought it could happen. But I—I guess it could happen. I think you got me doped, honey."

"Charley, Charley!" she cried, falling down on her knees beside him, holding his face in the tight

vise of her hands and reading with such closeness into his eyes that they seemed to merge into one. "Haven't you got your Loo? Haven't you got her?"

He sprang up at that, jerking her backward, and all the purple-red gushed up into his face again.

"Yes, by God, I've got you! I'll break the will. I'll—"

"Charley, no—no! He'd rise out of his grave at you. It's never been known where a will was broke where they didn't rise out of the grave to haunt."

He took her squarely by the shoulders, the tears running in furrows down his face.

"I'll get you out of this, Loo. No girl in God's world will have to find herself tied up to me without I can show her a million dollars every time she remembers that she's married to a rotter. I'll get you out of this, girl, so you won't even show a scratch. I'll—"

"Charley," she said, lifting herself by his coat lapels, and her eyes again so closely level with his, "you're crazy with the heat—stark, raving crazy! You got your chance, boy, to show what you're made of—can't you see that? We're going West, where men get swept out with clean air and clean living. We'll break ground in this here life for the kind of pay-dirt that 'll make a man of you. You hear? A man of you!"

He lifted her arms, and because they were pressing insistently down, squirmed out from beneath them.

"You're a good sport, girl; nobody can take that from you. But just the same, I'm going to let you off without a scratch."

"'Good sport'! I'd like to know, anyways, where I come in with all your solid-gold talk. Me that's stood behind somebody-or-other's counter ever since I had my working-papers."

"I'll get you out of—"

"Have I ever lived anywheres except in a dirty little North St. Louis flat with us three girls in a bed? Haven't I got my name all over town for speed, just because I've always had to rustle out and try to learn how to flatten out a dime to the size of a dollar? Where do I come in on the solid-gold talk, I'd like to know. I'm the penny-splitter of the world, the girl that made the Five-and-Ten-Cent Store millinery department famous. I can look tailor-made on a five-dollar bill and a tissue-paper pattern. Why, honey, with me scheming for you, starting out on your own is going to make a man of you. You got stuff in you. I knew it, Charley, the first night you spied me at the Highlands dance. Somewhere out West Charley Cox is now going to begin to show 'em the stuff in Charley Cox—that's what Charley Cox & Co. are going to do!"

He shook his head, turning away his eyes to hide their tears.

"You been stung, Loo. Nothing on earth can change that."

She turned his face back to her, smiling through her own tears.

"You're not adding up good this morning, Mr. Cox. When do you think I called you up last night? When could it have been if not after my sister broke her confidence to tell me? Why do you think all of a sudden last night I seen your bluff

through about Gerber? It was because I knew I had you where you needed me, Charley—I never would have dragged you down the other way in a million years, but when I knew I had you where you needed me—why, from that minute, honey, you didn't have a chance to dodge me!"

She wound her arms round him, trembling between the suppressed hysteria of tears and laughter.

"Not a chance, Charley!"

He jerked her so that her face fell back from him, foreshortened.

"Loo—oh, girl! Oh, girl!"

Her throat was tight and would not give her voice for coherence.

"Charley—we—we'll show 'em—you—me!"

Looking out above her head at the vapory sky showing through the parting of the pink-brocade curtains, rigidity raced over Mr. Cox, stiffening his hold of her.

The lean look had come out in his face; the flanges of his nose quivered; his head went up.

VI

NIGHTSHADE

OVER the silent places of the world flies the vulture of madness, pausing to wheel above isolated farm-houses, where a wife, already dizzy with the pressure of rarefied silence, looks up, magnetized. Then across the flat stretches, his shadow under him moving across moor and the sand of desert, slowing at the perpetually eastern edge of a mirage, brushing his actual wings against the brick of city walls; the garret of a dreamer, brain-sick with reality. Flopping, until she comes to gaze, outside the window of one so alone in a crowd that her four hall-bedroom walls are closing in upon her. Lowering over a childless house on the edge of a village.

Were times when Mrs. Hanna Burkhardt, who lived on the edge of a village in one such childless house, could in her fancy hear the flutter of wings, too. There had once been a visit to a doctor in High Street because of those head-noises and the sudden terror of not being able to swallow. He had stethoscoped and prescribed her change of scene. Had followed two weeks with cousins fifty miles away near Lida, Ohio, and a day's stop-over in

Cincinnati allowed by her railroad ticket. But six months after, in the circle of glow from a table-lamp that left the corners of the room in a chiaroscuro kind of gloom, there were again noises of wings rustling and of water lapping and the old stricture of the throat. Across the table, a Paisley cover between them, Mr. John Burkhardt, his short spade of beard already down over his shirt-front, arm hanging lax over his chair-side and newspaper fallen, sat forward in a hunched attitude of sleep, whistling noises coming occasionally through his breathing. A china clock, the centerpiece of the mantel, ticked spang into the silence, enhancing it.

Hands in lap, head back against the mat of her chair, Mrs. Burkhardt looked straight ahead of her into this silence—at a closed door hung with a newspaper rack, at a black-walnut horsehair divan, a great sea-shell on the carpet beside it. A nickel-plated warrior gleamed from the top of a base-burner that showed pink through its mica doors. He stood out against the chocolate-ocher wall-paper and a framed Declaration of Independence, hanging left. A coal fell. Mr. Burkhardt sat up, shook himself of sleep.

"Little chilly," he said, and in carpet slippers and unbuttoned waistcoat moved over to the base-burner, his feet, to avoid sloughing, not leaving the floor. He was slightly stooped, the sateen back to his waistcoat hiking to the curve of him. But he swung up the scuttle with a swoop, rattling coal freely down into the red-jowled orifice.

"Ugh, don't!" she said. "I'm burnin' up."

He jerked back the scuttle, returning to his chair,

and, picking up the fallen newspaper, drew down his spectacles from off his brow and fell immediately back into close, puckered scrutiny of the printed page.

"What time is it, Burkhardt? That old thing on the mantel's crazy."

He drew out a great silver watch.

"Seven-forty."

"O God!" she said. "I thought it was about ten."

The clock ticked in roundly again except when he rustled his paper in the turning. The fire was crackling now, too, in sharp explosions. Beyond the arc of lamp the room was deeper than ever in shadow. Finally John Burkhardt's head relaxed again to his shirt-front, the paper falling gently away to the floor. She regarded his lips puffing out as he breathed. Hands clasped, arms full length on the table, it was as if the flood of words pressing against the walls of her, to be shrieked rather than spoken, was flowing over to him. He jerked erect again, regarding her through blinks.

"Must 'a' dozed off," he said, reaching down for his newspaper.

She was winding her fingers now in and out among themselves.

"Burkhardt?"

"Eh?"

"What—does a person do that's smotherin'?"

"Eh?"

"I know. That's what I'm doing. Smotherin'!"

"A touch of the old trouble, Hanna?"

She sat erect, with her rather large white hands at the heavy base to her long throat. They rose

and fell to her breathing. Like Heine, who said so potently, "I am a tragedy," so she, too, in the sulky light of her eyes and the pulled lips and the ripple of shivers over her, proclaimed it of herself.

"Seven-forty! God! what 'll I do, Burkhardt? What 'll I do?"

"Go lay down on the sofa a bit, Hanna. I'll cover you with a plaid. It's the head-noises again bothering you."

"Seven-forty! What 'll I do? Seven-forty and nothing left but bed."

"I must 'a' dozed off, Hanna."

"Yes; you must 'a' dozed off," she laughed, her voice eaten into with the acid of her own scorn. "Yes; you must 'a' dozed off. The same way as you dozed off last night and last month and last year and the last eight years. The best years of my life—that's what you've dozed off, John Burkhardt. He 'must 'a' dozed off,'" she repeated, her lips quivering and lifting to reveal the white line of her large teeth. "Yes; I think you must 'a' dozed off!"

He was reading again in stolid profile.

She fell to tapping the broad toe of her shoe, her light, dilated eyes staring above his head. She was spare, and yet withal a roundness left to the cheek and forearm. Long-waisted and with a certain swing where it flowed down into straight hips, there was a bony, Olympian kind of bigness about her. Beneath the washed-out blue shirtwaist dress her chest was high, as if vocal. She was not without youth. Her head went up like a stag's to the passing of a band in the street, or a glance thrown after her, or

the contemplation of her own freshly washed yellow hair in the sunlight. She wore a seven glove, but her nails had great depth and pinkness, and each a clear half-moon. They were dug down now into her palms.

"For God's sake, talk! Say something, or I'll go mad!"

He laid his paper across his knee, pushing up his glasses.

"Sing a little something, Hanna. You're right restless this evening."

"'Restless'!" she said, her face wry. "If I got to sit and listen to that white-faced clock ticking for many more evenings of this winter, you'll find yourself with a raving maniac on your hands. That's how restless I am!" He rustled his paper again. "Don't read!" she cried. "Don't you dare read!"

He sat staring ahead, in a heavy kind of silence, breathing outward and passing his hand across his brow.

Her breathing, too, was distinctly audible.

"Lay down a bit, Hanna. I'll cover you—"

"If they land me in the bug-house, they can write on your tombstone when you die, 'Hanna Long Burkhardt went stark raving mad crazy with hucking at home because I let her life get to be a machine from six-o'clock breakfast to eight-o'clock bed, and she went crazy from it.' If that's any satisfaction to you, they can write that on your tombstone."

He mopped his brow this time, clearing his throat.

"You knew when we married, Hanna, they called me 'Silent' Burkhardt. I never was a great one

for talking unless there was something I wanted to say."

"I knew nothin' when I married you. Nothin' except that along a certain time every girl that can gets married. I knew nothin' except—except—"

"Except what?"

"Nothin'."

"I've never stood in your light, Hanna, of having a good time. Go ahead. I'm always glad when you go up-town with the neighbor women of a Saturday evening. I'd be glad if you'd have 'em in here now and then for a little sociability. Have 'em. Play the graphophone for 'em. Sing. You 'ain't done nothin' with your singin' since you give up choir."

"Neighbor women! Old maids' choir! That's fine excitement for a girl not yet twenty-seven!"

"Come; let's go to a moving picture, Hanna. Go wrap yourself up warm."

"Movie! Oh no; no movie for me with you snorin' through the picture till I'm ashamed for the whole place. If I was the kind of girl had it in me to run around with other fellows, that's what I'd be drove to do, the deal you've given me. Movie! That's a fine enjoyment to try to foist off on a woman to make up for eight years of being so fed up on stillness that she's half-batty!"

"Maybe there's something showin' in the op'ry-house to-night."

"Oh, you got a record to be proud of, John Burkhardt: Not a foot in that opera-house since we're married. I wouldn't want to have your feelin's!"

His quietude was like a great, impregnable, invisible wall inclosing him.

"I'm not the man can change his ways, Hanna. I married at forty, too late for that."

"I notice you liked my pep, all righty, when I was workin' in the feed-yard office. I hadn't been in it ten days before you were hangin' on my laughs from morning till night."

"I do yet, Hanna—only you don't laugh no more. There's nothin' so fine in a woman as sunshine."

"Provided you don't have to furnish any of it."

"Because a man 'ain't got it in him to be light in his ways don't mean he don't enjoy it in others. Why, there just ain't nothin' to equal a happy woman in the house! Them first months, Hanna, showed me what I'd been missin'. It was just the way I figured it—somebody around like you, singin' and putterin'. It was that laugh in the office made me bring it here, where I could have it always by me."

"It's been knocked out of me, every bit of laugh I ever had in me; lemme tell you that."

"I can remember the first time I ever heard you, Hanna. You was standin' at the office window lookin' out in the yards at Jerry Sims unloadin' a shipment of oats; and little Old Cocker was standin' on top of one of the sacks barkin' his head off. I—"

"Yeh; I met Clara Sims on the street yesterday, back here for a visit, and she says to me, she says: 'Hanna Burkhardt, you mean to tell me you never done nothing with your voice! You oughta be ashamed. If I was your husband, I'd spend my last cent trainin' that contralto of yours. You

oughtn't to let yourself go like this. Women don't do it no more.' That, from the tackiest girl that ever walked this town. I wished High Street had opened up and swallowed me."

"Now, Hanna, you mustn't—"

"In all these years never so much as a dance or a car-ride as far as Middletown. Church! Church! Church! Till I could scream at the sight of it. Not a year of my married life that 'ain't been a lodestone on my neck! Eight of 'em! Eight!"

"I'm not sayin' I'm not to blame, Hanna. A woman like you naturally likes life. I never wanted to hold you back. If I'm tired nights and dead on my feet from twelve hours on 'em, I never wanted you to change your ways."

"Yes; with a husband at home in bed, I'd be a fine one chasin' around this town alone, wouldn't I? That's the thanks a woman gets for bein' self-respectin'."

"I always kept hopin', Hanna, I could get you to take more to the home."

"The home—you mean the tomb!"

"Why, with the right attention, we got as fine an old place here as there is in this part of town, Hanna. If only you felt like giving it a few more touches that kinda would make a woman-place out of it! It 'ain't changed a whit from the way me and my old father run it together. A little touch here and there, Hanna, would help to keep you occupied and happier if—"

"I know. I know what's comin'."

"The pergola I had built. I used to think maybe you'd get to putter out there in the side-yard with

it, trailin' vines; the china-paintin' outfit I had sent down from Cincinnati when I seen it advertised in the *Up-State Gazette;* a spaniel or two from Old Cocker's new litter, barkin' around; all them things, I used to think, would give our little place here a feelin' that would change both of us for the better. With a more home-like feelin' things might have been different between us, Hanna."

"Keepin' a menagerie of mangy spaniels ain't my idea of livin'."

"Aw, now, Hanna, what's the use puttin' it that way? Take, for instance, it's been a plan of mine to paint the house, with the shutters green and a band of green shingles runnin' up under the eaves. A little encouragement from you and we could perk the place up right smart. All these years it's kinda gone down—even more than when I was a bachelor in it. Sunk in, kinda, like them iron jardinières I had put in the front yard for you to keep evergreen in. It's them little things, Hanna. Then that—that old idea of mine to take a little one from the orphanage—a young 'un around the—"

"O Lord!"

"I ain't goin' to mention it if it aggravates you, but—but makin' a home out of this gray old place would help us both, Hanna. There's no denyin' that. It's what I hoped for when I brought you home a bride here. Just had it kinda planned. You putterin' around the place in some kind of a pink apron like you women can rig yourselves up in and—"

"There ain't a girl in Adalia has dropped out of things the way I have. I had a singin' voice that everybody in this town said—"

"There's the piano, Hanna, bought special for it."

"I got a contralto that—"

"There never was anything give me more pleasure than them first years you used it. I ain't much to express myself, but it was mighty fine, Hanna, to hear you."

"Yes, I know; you snored into my singin' with enjoyment, all right."

"It's the twelve hours on my feet that just seem to make me dead to the world, come evening."

"A girl that had the whole town wavin' flags at her when she sung 'The Holy City' at the nineteen hundred street-carnival! Kittie Scogin Bevins, one of the biggest singers in New York to-day, nothing but my chorus! Where's it got me these eight years? Nowheres! She had enough sense to cut loose from Ed Bevins, who was a lodestone, too, and beat it. She's singing now in New York for forty a week with a voice that wasn't strong enough to be more than chorus to mine."

"Kittie Scogin, Hanna, is a poor comparison for any woman to make with herself."

"It is, is it? Well, I don't see it thataway. When she stepped off the train last week, comin' back to visit her old mother, I wished the whole depot would open up and swallow me—that's what I wished. Me and her that used to be took for sisters. I'm eight months younger, and I look eight years older. When she stepped off that train in them white furs and a purple face-veil, I just wished to God the whole depot would open and swallow me. That girl had sense. O God! didn't she have sense!"

"They say her sense is what killed Ed Bevins of shame and heartbreak."

"Say, don't tell me! It was town talk the way he made her toady to his folks, even after he'd been cut off without a cent. Kittie told me herself the very sight of the old Bevins place over on Orchard Street gives her the creeps down her back. If not for old lady Scogin, 'way up in the seventies, she'd never put her foot back in this dump. That girl had sense."

"There's not a time she comes back here it don't have an upsettin' influence on you, Hanna."

"I know what's upsettin' me, all right. I know!" He sighed heavily.

"I'm just the way I am, Hanna, and there's no teachin' an old dog new tricks. It's a fact I ain't much good after eight o'clock evenin's. It's a fact —a fact!"

They sat then in a further silence that engulfed them like fog. A shift of wind blew a gust of dry snow against the window-pane with a little sleety noise. And as another evidence of rising wind, a jerk of it came down the flue, rattling the fender of a disused grate.

"We'd better keep the water in the kitchen runnin' to-night. The pipes 'll freeze."

Tick-tock. Tick. Tock. She had not moved, still sitting staring above the top of his head. He slid out his watch, yawning.

"Well, if you think it's too raw for the movin' pictures, Hanna, I guess I'll be movin' up to bed. I got to be down to meet a five-o'clock shipment of fifty bales to-morrow. I'll be movin' along unless there's anything you want?"

"No—nothing."

"If—if you ain't sleepy awhile yet, Hanna, why not run over to Widow Dinninger's to pass the time of evenin'? I'll keep the door on the latch."

She sprang up, snatching a heavy black shawl, throwing it over her and clutching it closed at the throat.

"Where you goin', Hanna?"

"Walkin'," she said, slamming the door after her.

In Adalia, chiefly remarkable for the Indestructo Safe Works and a river which annually overflows its banks, with casualties, the houses sit well back from tree-bordered streets, most of them frame, shingle-roofed veterans that have lived through the cycle-like years of the bearing, the marrying, the burying of two, even three, generations of the same surname.

A three-year-old, fifteen-mile traction connects the court-house with the Indestructo Safe Works. High Street, its entire length, is paved. During a previous mayoralty the town offered to the Lida Tool Works a handsome bonus to construct branch foundries along its river-banks, and, except for the annual flood conditions, would have succeeded.

In spring Adalia is like a dear old lady's garden of marigold and bleeding-heart. Flushes of sweet-peas ripple along its picket fences and off toward the backyards are long grape-arbors, in autumn their great fruit-clusters ripening to purple frost. Come winter there is almost an instant shriveling to naked stalk, and the trellis-work behind vines comes through. Even the houses seem immediately to darken of last spring's paint, and, with windows

closed, the shades are drawn. Oftener than not Adalia spends its evening snugly behind these drawn shades in great scoured kitchens or dining-rooms, the house-fronts dark.

When Mrs. Burkhardt stepped out into an evening left thus to its stilly depth, shades drawn against it, a light dust of snow, just fallen, was scurrying up-street before the wind, like something phantom with its skirts blowing forward. Little drifts of it, dry as powder, had blown up against the porch. She sidestepped them, hurrying down a wind-swept brick walk and out a picket gate that did not swing entirely after. Behind her, the house with its wimple of shingle roof and unlighted front windows seemed to recede somewhere darkly. She stood an undecided moment, her face into the wind. Half down the block an arc-light swayed and gave out a moving circle of light. Finally she turned her back and went off down a side-street, past a lighted corner grocer, crossed a street to avoid the black mouth of an alley, then off at another right angle. The houses here were smaller, shoulder to shoulder and directly on the sidewalk.

Before one of these, for no particular reason distinguishable from the others, Mrs. Burkhardt stepped up two shallow steps and turned a key in the center of the door, which set up a buzz on its reverse side. Her hand, where it clutched the shawl at her throat, was reddening and roughening, the knuckles pushing up high and white. Waiting, she turned her back to the wind, her body hunched up against it.

There was a moving about within, the scrape of

a match, and finally the door opening slightly, a figure peering out.

"It's me, Mrs. Scogin—Hanna Burkhardt!"

The door swung back then, revealing a just-lighted parlor, opening, without introduction of hall, from the sidewalk.

"Well, if it ain't Hanna Burkhardt! What you doin' out this kind of a night? Come in. Kittie's dryin' her hair in the kitchen. Used to be she could sit on it, and it's ruint from the scorchin' curlin'-iron. I'll call her. Sit down, Hanna. How's Burkhardt? I'll call her. Oh, Kittie! Kit-tie, Hanna Burkhardt's here to see you."

In the wide flare of the swinging lamp, revealing Mrs. Scogin's parlor of chromo, china plaque, and crayon enlargement, sofa, whatnot, and wax bouquet embalmed under glass, Mrs. Burkhardt stood for a moment, blowing into her cupped hands, unwinding herself of shawl, something Niobian in her gesture.

"Yoo-hoo—it's only me, Kit! Shall I come out?"

"Naw—just a minute; I'll be in."

Mrs. Scogin seated herself on the edge of the sofa, well forward, after the manner of those who relax but ill to the give of upholstery. She was like a study of what might have been the grandmother of one of Rembrandt's studies of a grandmother. There were lines crawling over her face too manifold for even the etcher's stroke, and over her little shriveling hands that were too bird-like for warmth. There is actually something avian comes with the years. In the frontal bone pushing itself forward, the cheeks receding, and the eyes still bright. There

was yet that trenchant quality in Mrs. Scogin, in the voice and gaze of her.

"Sit down, Hanna."

"Don't care if I do."

"You can lean back against that chair-bow."

"Hate to muss it."

"How's Burkhardt?"

"All right."

"He's been made deacon—not?"

"Yeh."

"If mine had lived, he'd the makin' of a pillar. Once label a man with hard drinkin', and it's hard to get justice for him. There never was a man had more the makin' of a pillar than mine, dead now these sixteen years and molderin' in his grave for justice."

"Yes, Mrs. Scogin."

"You can lean back against that bow."

"Thanks."

"So Burkhardt's been made deacon."

"Three years already—you was at the church."

"A deacon. Mine went to his grave too soon."

"They said down at market to-day, Mrs. Scogin, that Addie Fitton knocked herself against the wood-bin and has water on the knee."

"Let the town once label a man with drinkin', and it's hard to get justice for him."

"It took Martha and Eda and Gessler's hired girl to hold her in bed with the pain."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Scogin, sucking in her words and her eyes seeming to strain through the present; "once label a man with drinkin'."

Kittie Scogin Bevins entered then through a rain

of bead portières. Insistently blond, her loosed-out hair newly dry and flowing down over a very spotted and very baby-blue kimono, there was something soft-fleshed about her, a not unappealing saddle of freckles across her nose, the eyes too light but set in with a certain feline arch to them.

"Hello, Han!"

"Hello, Kittie!"

"Snowing?"

"No."

"Been washing my hair to show it a good time. One month in this dump and they'd have to hire a hearse to roll me back to Forty-second Street in."

"This ain't nothing. Wait till we begin to get snowed in!"

"I know. Say, you c'n tell me nothing about this tank I dunno already. I was buried twenty-two years in it. Move over, ma."

She fitted herself into the lower curl of the couch, crossing her hands at the back of her head, drawing up her feet so that, for lack of space, her knees rose to a hump.

"What's new in Deadtown, Han?"

"'New'! This dump don't know we got a new war. They think it's the old Civil one left over."

"Burkhardt's been made a deacon, Kittie."

"O Lord! ma, forget it!" Mrs. Scogin Bevins threw out her hands to Mrs. Burkhardt in a wide gesture, indicating her mother with a forefinger, then with it tapping her own brow. "Crazy as a loon! Bats!"

"If your father had—"

"Ma, for Gossakes—"

"You talk to Kittie, Hanna. My girls won't none

of 'em listen to me no more. I tell 'em they're fightin' over my body before it's dead for this house and the one on Ludlow Street. It's precious little for 'em to be fightin' for before I'm dead, but if not for it, I'd never be gettin' these visits from a one of 'em."

"Ma!"

"I keep tellin' her, Kittie, to stay home. New York ain't no place for a divorced woman to set herself right with the Lord."

"Ma, if you don't quit raving and clear on up to bed, I'll pack myself out to-night yet, and then you'll have a few things to set right with the Lord. Go on up, now."

"I—"

"Go on—you hear?"

Mrs. Scogin went then, tiredly and quite bent forward, toward a flight of stairs that rose directly from the parlor, opened a door leading up into them, the frozen breath of unheated regions coming down.

"Quick—close that door, ma!"

"Come to see a body, Hanna, when she ain't here. She won't stay at home, like a God-fearin' woman ought to."

"Light the gas-heater up there, if you expect me to come to bed. I'm used to steam-heated flats, not barns."

"She's a sassy girl, Hanna. Your John a deacon and hers lies molderin' in his grave, a sui—"

Mrs. Scogin Bevins flung herself up, then, a wave of red riding up her face.

"If you don't go up—if you—don't! Go—now!

Honest, you're gettin' so luny you need a keeper. Go—you hear?"

The door shut slowly, inclosing the old figure. She relaxed to the couch, trying to laugh.

"Luny!" she said. "Bats! Nobody home!"

"I like your hair like that, Kittie. It looks swell."

"It's easy. I'll fix it for you some time. It's the vampire swirl. All the girls are wearing it."

"Remember the night, Kit, we was singin' duets for the Second Street Presbyterian out at Grody's Grove and we got to hair-pullin' over whose curls was the longest?"

"Yeh. I had on a blue dress with white polka-dots."

"That was fifteen years ago. Remember Joe Claiborne promised us a real stage-job, and we opened a lemonade-stand on our front gate to pay his commission in advance?"

They laughed back into the years.

"O Lord! them was days! Seems to me like fifty years ago."

"Not to me, Kittie. You've done things with your life since then. I 'ain't."

"You know what I've always told you about yourself, Hanna. If ever there was a fool girl, that was Hanna Long. Lord! if I'm where I am on my voice, where would you be?"

"I was a fool."

"I could have told you that the night you came running over to tell me."

"There was no future in this town for me, Kit. Stenoggin' around from one office to another. He was the only real provider ever came my way."

"I always say if John Burkhardt had shown you the color of real money! But what's a man to-day on just a fair living? Not worth burying yourself in a dump like this for. No, sirree. When I married Ed, anyways I thought I smelled big money. I couldn't see ahead that his father'd carry out his bluff and cut him off. But what did you have to smell—a feed-yard in a hole of a town! What's the difference whether you live in ten rooms like yours or in four like this as long as you're buried alive? A girl can always do that well for herself after she's took big chances. You could be Lord knows where now if you'd 'a' took my advice four years ago and lit out when I did."

"I know it, Kit. God knows I've eat out my heart with knowin' it! Only—only it was so hard—a man givin' me no more grounds than he does. What court would listen to his stillness for grounds? I 'ain't got grounds."

"Say, you could 'a' left that to me. My little lawyer's got a factory where he manufactures them. He could 'a' found a case of incompatibility between the original turtle-doves."

"God! His stillness, Kittie—like—"

"John Burkhardt would give me the razzle-dazzle jimjams overnight, he would. That face reminds me of my favorite funeral."

"I told him to-night, Kittie, he's killin' me with his deadness. I ran out of the house from it. It's killin' me."

"Why, you poor simp, standing for it!"

"That's what I come over for, Kit. I can't stand no more. If I don't talk to some one, I'll bust,

There's no one in this town I can open up to. Him so sober—and deacon. They don't know what it is to sit night after night dyin' from his stillness. Whole meals, Kit, when he don't open his mouth except, 'Hand me this; hand me that'—and his beard movin' up and down so when he chews. Because a man don't hit you and gives you spending-money enough for the little things don't mean he can't abuse you with—with just gettin' on your nerves so terrible. I'm feelin' myself slip—crazy—ever since I got back from Cincinnati and seen what's goin' on in the big towns and me buried here; I been feelin' myself slip—slip, Kittie."

"Cincinnati! Good Lord! if you call that life! Any Monday morning on Forty-second Street makes Cincinnati look like New-Year's Eve. If you call Cincinnati life!"

"He's small, Kittie. He's a small potato of a man in his way of livin'. He can live and die without doin' anything except the same things over and over again, year out and year in."

"I know. I know. Ed was off the same pattern. It's the Adalia brand. Lord! Hanna Long, if you could see some of the fellows I got this minute paying attentions to me in New York, you'd lose your mind. Spenders! Them New York guys make big and spend big, and they're willing to part with the spondoolaks. That's the life!"

"I— You look it, Kit. I never seen a girl get back her looks and keep 'em like you. I says to him to-night, I says, 'When I look at myself in the glass, I wanna die.'"

"You're all there yet, Hanna. Your voice over

here the other night was something immense. Big enough to cut into any restaurant crowd, and that's what counts in cabaret. I don't tell anybody how to run his life, but if I had your looks and your contralto, I'd turn 'em into money, I would. There's forty dollars a week in you this minute."

Mrs. Burkhardt's head went up. Her mouth had fallen open, her eyes brightening as they widened.

"Kit—when you goin' back?"

"To-morrow a week, honey—if I live through it."

"Could—you help me—your little lawyer—your—"

"Remember, I ain't advising—"

"Could you, Kit, and to—to get a start?"

"They say it of me there ain't a string in the Bijou Café that I can't pull my way."

"Could you, Kit? Would you?"

"I don't tell nobody how to run his life, Hanna. It's mighty hard to advise the other fellow about his own business. I don't want it said in this town, that's down on me, anyways, that Kit Scogin put ideas in Hanna Long's head."

"You didn't, Kit. They been there. Once I answered an ad. to join a county fair. I even sent money to a vaudeville agent in Cincinnati. I—"

"Nothing doing in vaudeville for our kind of talent. It's cabaret where the money and easy hours is these days. Just a plain little solo act—contralto is what you can put over. A couple of 'Where Is My Wandering Boy To-night' sob-solos is all you need. I'll let you meet Billy Howe of the Bijou. Billy's a great one for running in a chaser act or two."

"I— How much would it cost, Kittie, to—to—"

"Hundred and fifty done it for me, wardrobe and all."

"Kittie, I— Would you—"

"Sure I would! Only, remember, I ain't responsible. I don't tell anybody how to run his life. That's something everybody's got to decide for herself."

"I—have—decided, Kittie."

At something after that stilly one-o'clock hour when all the sleeping noises of lath and wainscoting creak out, John Burkhardt lifted his head to the moving light of a lamp held like a torch over him, even the ridge of his body completely submerged beneath the great feather billow of an oceanic walnut bedstead.

"Yes, Hanna?"

"Wake up!"

"I been awake—"

She set the lamp down on the brown-marble top of a wash-stand, pushed back her hair with both hands, and sat down on the bed-edge, heavily breathing from a run through deserted night's streets.

"I gotta talk to you, Burkhardt—now—to-night."

"Now's no time, Hanna. Come to bed."

"Things can't go on like this, John."

He lay back slowly.

"Maybe you're right, Hanna. I been layin' up here and thinkin' the same myself. What's to be done?"

"I've got to the end of my rope."

"With so much that God has given us, Hanna—

health and prosperity—it's a sin before Him that unhappiness should take root in this home."

"If you're smart, you won't try to feed me up on gospel to-night!"

"I'm willin' to meet you, Hanna, on any proposition you say. How'd it be to move down to Schaefer's boardin'-house for the winter, where it 'll be a little recreation for you evenings, or say we take a trip down to Cincinnati for a week. I—"

"Oh no," she said, looking away from him and her throat throbbing. "Oh no, you don't! Them things might have meant something to me once, but you've come too late with 'em. For eight years I been eatin' out my heart with 'em. Now you couldn't pay me to live at Schaefer's. I had to beg too long for it. Cincinnati! Why, its New-Year's Eve is about as lively as a real town's Monday morning. Oh no, you don't! Oh no!"

"Come on to bed, Hanna. You'll catch cold. Your breath's freezin'."

"I'm goin'—away, for good—that's where—I'm goin'!"

Her words threatened to come out on a sob, but she stayed it, the back of her hand to her mouth.

Her gaze was riveted, and would not move, from a little curtain above the wash-stand, a guard against splashing crudely embroidered in a little hand-in-hand boy and girl.

"You—you're sayin' a good many hasty things to-night, Hanna."

"Maybe."

He plucked at a gray-wool knot in the coverlet.

"Mighty hasty things."

She turned, then, plunging her hands into the great suds of feather bed, the whole thrust of her body toward him.

"'Hasty'! Is eight years hasty? Is eight years of buried-alive hasty? I'm goin', John Burkhardt; this time I'm goin' sure—sure as my name is Hanna Long."

"Goin' where, Hanna?"

"Goin' where each day ain't like a clod of mud on my coffin. Goin' where there's a chance for a woman like me to get a look-in on life before she's as skinny a hex at twenty-seven as old lady Scog—as—like this town's full of. I'm goin' to make my own livin' in my own way, and I'd like to see anybody try to stop me."

"I ain't tryin', Hanna."

She drew back in a flash of something like surprise.

"You're willin', then?"

"No, Hanna, not willin'."

"You can't keep me from it. Incompatibility is grounds!"

The fires of her rebellion, doused for the moment, broke out again, flaming in her cheeks.

He raised himself to his elbow, regarding her there in her flush, the white line of her throat whiter because of it. She was strangely, not inconsiderably taller.

"Why, Hanna, what you been doin' to yourself?"

Her hand flew to a new and elaborately piled coiffure, a half-fringe of curling-iron, little fluffed-out tendrils escaping down her neck.

"In—incompatibility is grounds."

"It's mighty becomin', Hanna. Mighty becomin'."

"It's grounds, all right!"

"'Grounds'? Grounds for what, Hanna?"

She looked away, her throat distending as she swallowed.

"Divorce."

There was a pause, then so long that she had a sense of falling through its space.

"Look at me, Hanna!"

She swung her gaze reluctantly to his. He was sitting erect now, a kind of pallor setting in behind the black beard.

"Leggo!" she said, loosening his tightening hand from her wrists. "Leggo; you hurt!"

"I—take it when a woman uses that word in her own home, she means it."

"This one does."

"You're a deacon's wife. Things—like this are—are pretty serious with people in our walk of life. We—'ain't learned in our communities yet not to take the marriage law as of God's own makin'. I'm a respected citizen here."

"So was Ed Bevins. It never hurt his hide."

"But it left her with a black name in the town."

"Who cares? She don't."

"It's no good to oppose a woman, Hanna, when she's made up her mind; but I'm willin' to meet you half-way on this thing. Suppose we try it again. I got some plans for perkin' things up a bit between us. Say we join the Buckeye Bowling Club, and—"

"No! No! No! That gang of church-pillars! I can't stand it, I tell you; you mustn't try to keep me! You mustn't! I'm a rat in a trap here. Gimme a few dollars. Hundred and fifty is all I ask. Not

even alimony. Lemme apply. Gimme grounds. It's done every day. Lemme go. What's done can't be undone. I'm not blamin' you. You're what you are and I'm what I am. I'm not blamin' anybody. You're what you are, and God Almighty can't change you. Lemme go, John; for God's sake, lemme go!"

"Yes," he said, finally, not taking his eyes from her and the chin hardening so that it shot out and up. "Yes, Hanna; you're right. You got to go."

The skeleton of the Elevated Railway structure straddling almost its entire length, Sixth Avenue, sullen as a clayey stream, flows in gloom and crash. Here, in this underworld created by man's superstructure, Mrs. Einstein, Slightly Used Gowns, nudges Mike's Eating-Place from the left, and on the right Stover's Vaudeville Agency for Lilliputians divides office-space and rent with the Vibro Health Belt Company. It is a kind of murky drain, which, flowing between, catches the refuse from Fifth Avenue and the leavings from Broadway. To Sixth Avenue drift men who, for the first time in a Misspending life, are feeling the prick of a fraying collar. Even Fifth Avenue is constantly feeding it. A *couturier's* model gone hippy; a specialty-shop gone bankrupt; a cashier's books gone over. Its shops are second-hand, and not a few of its denizens are down on police records as sleight-of-hand. At night women too weary to be furtive turn in at its family entrances. It is the cauldron of the city's eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, and tongue of dog. It is the home of the most daring all-night eating-places, the smallest store, the largest store, the greatest

revolving stage, the dreariest night court, and the drabest night birds in the world.

War has laid its talons and scratched slightly beneath the surface of Sixth Avenue. Hufnagel's Delicatessen, the briny hoar of twenty years upon it, went suddenly into decline and the hands of a receiver. Recruiting stations have flung out imperious banners. Keeley's Chop-House—Open All Night—reluctantly swings its too hospitable doors to the one-o'clock-closing mandate.

To the New-Yorker whose nights must be filled with music, preferably jazz, to pass Keeley's and find it dark is much as if Bacchus, emulating the newest historical rogue, had donned cassock and hood. Even that half of the evening east of the cork-popping land of the midnight son has waned at Keeley's. No longer a road-house on the incandescent road to dawn, there is something hangdog about its very waiters, moving through the easy maze of half-filled tables; an orchestra, sheepish of its accomplishment, can lift even a muted melody above the light babel of light diners. There is a cabaret, too, bravely bidding for the something that is gone.

At twelve o'clock, five of near-Broadway's best breed, in woolly anklets and wristlets and a great shaking of curls, execute the poodle-prance to half the encores of other days. May Deland, whose ripple of hip and droop of eyelid are too subtle for censorship, walks through her hula-hula dance, much of her abandon abandoned. A pair of *apaches* whirl for one hundred and twenty consecutive seconds to a great bang of cymbals and seventy-five dollars a

week. At shortly before one Miss Hanna de Long, who renders ballads at one-hour intervals, rose from her table and companion in the obscure rear of the room, to finish the evening and her cycle with "Darling, Keep the Grate-Fire Burning," sung in a contralto calculated to file into no matter what din of midnight dining.

In something pink, silk, and conservatively V, she was a careful management's last bland ingredient to an evening that might leave too Cayenne a sting to the tongue.

At still something before one she had finished, and, without encore, returned to her table.

"Gawd!" she said, and leaned her head on her hand. "I better get me a job hollerin' down a well!"

Her companion drained his stemless glass with a sharp jerking back of the head. His was the short, stocky kind of assurance which seemed to say, "Greater securities hath no man than mine, which are gilt-edged." Obviously, Mr. Lew Kaminer clipped his coupons.

"Not so bad," he said. "The song ain't dead; the crowd is."

"Say, they can't hurt my feelin's. I been a chaser-act ever since I hit the town."

"Well, if I can sit and listen to a song in long skirts twelve runnin' weeks, three or four nights every one of 'em, take it from me, there's a whistle in it somewhere."

"Just the same," she said, pushing away her glass, "my future in this business is behind me."

He regarded her, slumped slightly in his chair, celluloid toothpick dangling. There was something

square about his face, abetted by a parted-in-the-middle toupee of great craftsmanship, which revealed itself only in the jointure over the ears of its slightly lighter hair with the brown of his own. There was a monogram of silk on his shirt-sleeve, of gold on his bill-folder, and of diamonds on the black band across the slight rotundity of his waistcoat.

"Never you mind, I'm for you, girl," he said.

There was an undeniable taking-off of years in Miss de Long. Even the very texture of her seemed younger and the skin massaged to a new creaminess, the high coiffure blonder, the eyes quicker to dart.

"Lay off, candy kid," she said. "You're going to sugar."

"Have another fizz," he said, clicking his fingers for a waiter.

"Anything to please the bold, bad man," she said.

"You're a great un," he said. "Fellow never knows how to take you from one minute to the next."

"You mean a girl never knows how to take you."

"Say," he said, "any time anybody puts anything over on you!"

"And you?"

"There you are!" he cried, eying her fizz. "Drink it down; it's good for what ails you."

"Gawd!" she said. "I wish I knew what it was is ailin' me!"

"Drink 'er down!"

"You think because you had me goin' on these things last night that to-night little sister ain't goin' to watch her step. Well, watch her watch her step."

Nevertheless, she drank rather thirstily half the contents of the glass. "I knew what I was doin' every minute of the time last night, all righty. I was just showin' us a good time."

"Sure!"

"It's all right for us girls to take what we want, but the management don't want nothing rough around—not in war-time."

"Right idea!"

"There's nothing rough about me, Lew. None of you fellows can't say that about me. I believe in a girl havin' a good time, but I believe in her always keepin' her self-respect. I always say it never hurt no girl to keep her self-respect."

"Right!"

"When a girl friend of mine loses that, I'm done with her. That don't get a girl nowheres. That's why I keep to myself as much as I can and don't mix in with the girls on the bill with me, if—"

"What's become of the big blond-looker used to run around with you when you was over at the Bijou?"

"Me and Kit ain't friends no more."

"She was some looker."

"The minute I find out a girl ain't what a self-respectin' girl ought to be then that lets me out. There's nothin' would keep me friends with her. If ever I was surprised in a human, Lew, it was in Kittie Scogin. She got me my first job here in New York. I give her credit for it, but she done it because she didn't have the right kind of a pull with Billy Howe. She done a lot of favors for me in her way, but the minute I find out a girl ain't self-respectin' I'm done with that girl every time."

"That baby had some pair of shoulders!"

"I ain't the girl to run a friend down, anyway, when she comes from my home town; but I could tell tales—Gawd! I could tell tales!" There was new loquacity and a flush to Miss de Long. She sipped again, this time almost to the depth of the glass. "The way to find out about a person, Lew, is to room with 'em in the same boardin'-house. Beware of the baby stare is all I can tell you. Beware of that."

"That's what *you* got," he said, leaning across to top her hand with his, "two big baby stares."

"Well, Lew Kaminer," she said, "you'd kid your own shadow. Callin' me a baby-stare. Of all things! Lew Kaminer!" She looked away to smile.

"Drink it all down, baby-stare," he said, lifting the glass to her lips. They were well concealed and back away from the thinning patter of the crowd, so that, as he neared her, he let his face almost graze—indeed touch, hers.

She made a great pretense of choking.

"O-oh! burns!"

"Drink it down—like a major."

She bubbled into the glass, her eyes laughing at him above its rim.

"Aw gone!"

He clicked again with his fingers.

"Once more, Charlie!" he said, shoving their pair of glasses to the table-edge.

"You ain't the only money-bag around the place!" she cried, flopping down on the table-cloth a bulky wad tied in one corner of her handkerchief.

"Well, whatta you know about that? Pay-day?"

"Yeh—while it lasts. I hear there ain't goin' to be no more cabarets or Camembert cheese till after the war."

"What you going to do with it—buy us a round of fizz?"

She bit open the knot, a folded bill dropping to the table, uncurling.

"Lord!" she said, contemplating and flipping it with her finger-tip. "Where I come from that twenty-dollar bill every week would keep me like a queen. Here it ain't even chicken feed."

"You know where there's more chicken feed waitin' when you get hard up, sister. You're slower to gobble than most. You know what I told you last night, kiddo—you need lessons."

"What makes me sore, Lew, is there ain't an act on this bill shows under seventy-five. It goes to show the higher skirts the higher the salary in this business."

"You oughta be singin' in grand op'ra."

"Yeh—sure! The diamond horseshoe is waitin' for the chance to land me one swift kick. It only took me twelve weeks and one meal a day to land this after Kittie seen to it that they let me out over at the Bijou. Say, I know where I get off in this town, Lew. If there's one thing I know, it's where I get off. I ain't a squab with a pair of high-priced ankles. I'm down on the agencies' books as a chaser-act, and I'm down with myself for that. If there's one thing I 'ain't got left, it's illusions. Get me? Illusions."

She hitched sidewise in her chair, dipped her fore-

finger into her fresh glass, snapped it at him so that he blinked under the tiny spray.

"That for you!" she said, giggling. She was now repeatedly catching herself up from a too constant impulse to repeat that giggle.

"You little devil!" he said, reaching back for his handkerchief.

She dipped again, this time deeper, and aimed straighter.

"Quit!" he said, catching her wrist and bending over it. "Quit it, or I'll bite!"

"Ow! Ouch!"

Her mouth still resolute not to loosen, she jerked back from him. There was only the high flush which she could not control, and the gaze, heavy lidded, was not so sure as it might have been. She was quietly, rather pleasantly, dizzy.

"I wish—" she said. "I—wi-ish—"

"What do you wi-ish?"

"Oh, I—I dunno what I wish!"

"If you ain't a card!"

He had lighted a cigar, and, leaning toward her, blew out a fragrant puff to her.

"M-m-m!" she said; "it's a Cleopatra."

"Nop."

"A El Dorado."

"Guess again."

"A what, then?"

"It's a Habana Queen. Habana because it reminds me of Hanna."

"Aw—you!"

At this crowning puerility Mr. Kaminer paused suddenly, as if he had detected in his laughter a bray.

"Is Habana in the war, Lew?"

"Darned if I know exactly."

"Ain't this war just terrible, Lew?"

"Don't let it worry you, girl. If it puts you out of business, remember, it's boosted my stocks fifty per cent. You know what I told you about chicken feed."

She buried her nose in her handkerchief, turning her head. Her eyes had begun to crinkle.

"It—it's just awful! All them sweet boys!"

"Now, cryin' ain't goin' to help. You 'ain't got no one marchin' off."

"That's just it. I 'ain't got no one. Everything is something awful, ain't it?" Her sympathies and her risibilities would bubble to the surface to confuse her. "Awful!"

He scraped one forefinger against the other.

"Cry-baby! Cry-baby, stick your little finger in your little eye!"

She regarded him wryly, her eyes crinkled now quite to slits.

"You can laugh!"

"Look at the cry-baby!"

"I get so darn blue."

"Now—now—"

"Honest to Gawd, Lew, I get so darn blue I could die."

"You're a nice girl, and I'd like to see anybody try to get fresh with you!"

"Do you—honest, Lew—like me?"

"There's something about you, girl, gets me every time. Cat-eyes! Kitty-eyes!"

"Sometimes I get so blue—get to thinkin' of home

and the way it all happened. You know the way a person will. Home and the—divorce and the way it all happened with—him—and how I come here and—where it's got me, and—and I just say to myself, 'What's the use?' You know, Lew, the way a person will. Back there, anyways, I had a home. There's something in just havin' a home, lemme tell you. Bein' a somebody in your own home."

"You're a somebody any place they put you."

"You never seen the like the way it all happened, Lew. So quick! The day I took the train was like I was walkin' for good out of a dream. Not so much as a post-card from there since—"

"Uh—uh—now—cry-baby!"

"I—ain't exactly sorry, Lew; only God knows, more 'n once in those twelve weeks out of work I was for goin' back and patchin' it up with him. I ain't exactly sorry, Lew, but—but there's only one thing on God's earth that keeps me from being sorry."

"What?"

"You."

He flecked his cigar, hitching his arm up along the chair-back, laughed, reddened slightly.

"That's the way to talk! These last two nights you been lightin' up with a man so he can get within ten feet of you. Now you're shoutin'!"

She drained her glass, blew her nose, and wiped her eyes.

She was sitting loosely forward now, her hand out on his.

"You're the only thing on God's earth that's kept me from—sneakin' back there—honest, Lew,

I'd have gone back long ago and eat dirt to make it up with him—if not for you. I—ain't built like Kittie Scogin and those girls. I got to be self-respectin' with the fellows or nothing. They think more of you in the end—that's my theory."

"Sure!"

"A girl's fly or—she just naturally ain't that way. That's where all my misunderstanding began with Kittie—when she wanted me to move over in them rooms on Forty-ninth Street with her—a girl's that way or she just ain't that way!"

"Sure!"

"Lew—will you—are you—you ain't kiddin' me all these weeks? Taxicabbin' me all night in the Park and—drinkin' around this way all the time together. You 'ain't been kiddin' me, Lew?"

He shot up his cigar to an oblique.

"Now you're shoutin'!" he repeated. "It took three months to get you down off your high horse, but now we're talkin' the same language."

"Lew!"

"It ain't every girl I take up with; just let that sink in. I like 'em frisky, but I like 'em cautious. That's where you made a hit with me. Little of both. Them that nibble too easy ain't worth the catch."

She reached out the other hand, covering his with her both.

"You're—talkin' weddin'-bells, Lew?"

He regarded her, the ash of his cigar falling and scattering down his waistcoat.

"What bells?"

"Weddin', Lew." Her voice was as thin as a reed.

"O Lord!" he said, pushing back slightly from the table. "Have another fizz, girl, and by that time we'll be ready for a trip in my underground balloon. Waiter!"

She drew down his arm, quickly restraining it. She was not so sure now of controlling the muscles of her mouth.

"Lew!"

"Now—now—"

"Please, Lew! It's what kept me alive. Thinkin' you meant that. Please, Lew! You ain't goin' to turn out like all the rest in this town? You—the first fellow I ever went as far as—last night with. I'll stand by you, Lew, through thick and thin. You stand by me. You make it right with me, Lew, and—"

He cast a quick glance about, grasped at the sides of the table, and leaned toward her, *sotto*.

"For God's sake, hush! Are you crazy?"

"No," she said, letting the tears roll down over the too frank gyrations of her face—"no, I ain't crazy. I only want you to do the right thing by me, Lew. I'm—blue. I'm crazy afraid of the bigness of this town. There ain't a week I don't expect my notice here. It's got me. If you been stringin' me along like the rest of 'em, and I can't see nothing ahead of me but the struggle for a new job—and the tryin' to buck up against what a decent girl has got to—"

"Why, you're crazy with the heat, girl! I thought you and me was talking the same language. I want to do the right thing by you. Sure I do! Anything in reason is yours for the askin'. That's what I been comin' to."

"Then, Lew, I want you to do by me like you'd want your sister done by."

"I tell you you're crazy. You been hitting up too many fizzes lately."

"I—"

"You ain't fool enough to think I'm what you'd call a free man? I don't bring my family matters down here to air 'em over with you girls. You're darn lucky that I like you well enough to—well, that I like you as much as I do. Come, now; tell you what I'm goin' to do for you: You name your idea of what you want in the way of—"

"O God! Why don't I die? I ain't fit for nothing else!"

He cast a glance around their deserted edge of the room. A waiter, painstakingly oblivious, stood two tables back.

"Wouldn't I be better off out of it? Why don't I die?"

He was trembling down with a suppression of rage and concern for the rising gale in her voice.

"You can't make a scene in public with me and get away with it. If that's your game, it won't land you anywhere. Stop it! Stop it now and talk sense, or I'll get up. By God! if you get noisy, I'll get up and leave you here with the whole place givin' you the laugh. You can't throw a scare in me."

But Miss de Long's voice and tears had burst the dam of control. There was an outburst that rose and broke on a wave of hysteria.

"Lemme die—that's all I ask! What's there in it for me? What has there ever been? Don't do it, Lew! Don't—don't!"

It was then Mr. Kaminer pushed back his chair, flopped down his napkin, and rose, breathing heavily enough, but his face set in an exaggerated kind of quietude as he moved through the maze of tables, exchanged a check for his hat, and walked out.

For a stunned five minutes her tears, as it were, seared, she sat after him.

The waiter had withdrawn to the extreme left of the deserted edge of the room, talking behind his hand to two colleagues in servility, their faces listening and breaking into smiles.

Finally Miss de Long rose, moving through the zigzag paths of empty tables toward a deserted dressing-room. In there she slid into black-velvet slippers and a dark-blue walking-skirt, pulled on over the pink silk, tucking it up around the waist so that it did not sag from beneath the hem, squirmed into a black-velvet jacket with a false dicky made to emulate a blouse-front, and a blue-velvet hat hung with a curtain-like purple face-veil.

As she went out the side, Keeley's was closing its front doors.

Outside, not even to be gainsaid by Sixth Avenue, the night was like a moist flower held to the face. A spring shower, hardly fallen, was already drying on the sidewalks, and from the patch of Bryant Park across the maze of car-tracks there stole the immemorial scent of rain-water and black earth, a just-set-out crescent of hyacinths giving off their light steam of fragrance. How insidious is an old scent! It can creep into the heart like an ache. Who has not loved beside thyme or at the sweetness of dusk? Dear, silenced laughs can come back on

a whiff from a florist's shop. Oh, there is a nostalgia lurks in old scents!

Even to Hanna de Long, hurrying eastward on Forty-second Street, huggingly against the shadow of darkened shop-windows, there was a new sting of tears at the smell of earth, daring, in the lull of a city night, to steal out.

There are always these dark figures that scuttle thus through the first hours of the morning.

Whither?

Twice remarks were flung after her from passing figures in slouch-hats—furtive remarks through closed lips.

At five minutes past one she was at the ticket-office grating of a train-terminal that was more ornate than a rajah's dream.

"Adalia—please. Huh? Ohio. Next train."

"Seven-seven. Track nine. Round trip?"

"N-no."

"Eighteen-fifty."

She again bit open the corner knot of her handkerchief.

When Hanna de Long, freshly train-washed of train dust, walked down Third Street away from the station, old man Rentzenauer, for forty-odd springs coaxing over the same garden, was spraying a hose over a side-yard of petunias, shirt-sleeved, his waistcoat hanging open, and in the purpling light his old head merging back against a story-and-a-half house the color of gray weather and half a century of service.

At sight of him who had shambled so taken-for-

granted through all of her girlhood, such a trembling seized hold of Hanna de Long that she turned off down Amboy Street, making another wide detour to avoid a group on the Koerner porch, finally approaching Second Street from the somewhat straggly end of it farthest from the station.

She was trembling so that occasionally she stopped against a vertigo that went with it, wiped up under the curtain of purple veil at the beads of perspiration which would spring out along her upper lip. She was quite washed of rouge, except just a swift finger-stroke of it over the cheek-bones.

She had taken out the dicky, too, and for some reason filled in there with a flounce of pink net ripped off from the little ruffles that had flowed out from her sleeves. She was without baggage.

At Ludlow Street she could suddenly see the house, the trees meeting before it in a lace of green, the two iron jardinières empty. They had been painted, and were drying now of a clay-brown coat.

When she finally went up the brick walk, she thought once that she could not reach the bell with the strength left to pull it. She did, though, pressing with her two hands to her left side as she waited. The house was in the process of painting, too, still wet under a first wash of gray. The pergola, also.

The door swung back, and then a figure emerged full from a background of familiarly dim hallway and curve of banister. She was stout enough to be panting slightly, and above the pink-and-white-checked apron her face was ruddy, forty, and ever so inclined to smile.

"Yes?"

"Is—is—"

Out from the hallway shot a cocker spaniel, loose-eared, yapping.

"Queenie, Queenie—come back. She won't bite—Queenie—bad girl!—come back from that nasturtium-bed—bad girl!—all washed and combed so pretty for a romp with her favver when him come home so tired. Queenie!"

She caught her by a rear leg as she leaped back, wild to rollick, tucking her under one arm, administering three diminutive punishments on the shaggy ears.

"Bad! Bad!"

"Is Mr.—Burkhardt—home?"

"Aw, now, he ain't! I sent him down by Gredel's nurseries on his way home to-night, for some tulip-bulbs for my iron jardinières. He ought to be back any minute if he 'ain't stopped to brag with old man Gredel that our arbutus beats his." Then, smiling and rubbing with the back of her free hand at a flour-streak across her cheek: "If—if it's the lady from the orphan asylum come to see about the —the little kid we want—is there anything I can do for you? I'm his wife. Won't you come in?"

"Oh no!" said Miss de Long, now already down two of the steps. "I—I— Oh no, no!—thank you! Oh no—no!—thank you!"

She walked swiftly, the purple veil blown back and her face seeming to look out of it whitely, so whitely that she became terrible.

Night was at hand, and Adalia was drawing down its front shades.

VII

GET READY THE WREATHS

WHERE St. Louis begins to peter out into brick- and limestone-kilns and great scars of unworked and overworked quarries, the first and more unpretentious of its suburbs take up—Benson, Maplehurst, and Ridgeway Heights intervening with one-story brick cottages and two-story packing-cases—between the smoke of the city and the carefully parked Queen Anne quietude of Glenwood and Croton Grove.

Over Benson hangs a white haze of limestone, gritty with train and foundry smoke. At night the lime-kilns, spotted with white deposits, burn redly, showing through their open doors like great, inflamed diphtheretic throats, tongues of flame bursting and licking out.

Winchester Road, which runs out from the heart of the city to string these towns together, is paved with brick, and its traffic, for the most part, is the great, tin-tired dump-carts of the quarries and steel interurban electric cars which hum so heavily that even the windows of outlying cottages titillate.

For blocks, from Benson to Maplehurst and from Maplehurst to Ridgeway Heights, Winchester Road

repeats itself in terms of the butcher, the baker, the corner saloon. A feed-store. A monument- and stone-cutter. A confectioner. A general-merchandise store, with a glass case of men's collars outside the entrance. The butcher, the baker, the corner saloon.

At Benson, where this highway cuts through, the city, wreathed in smoke, and a great oceanic stretch of roofs are in easy view, and at closer range, an outlying section of public asylums for the city's discard of its debility and its senility.

Jutting a story above the one-storied march of Winchester Road, The Convenience Merchandise Corner, Benson, overlooks, from the southeast upstairs window, a remote view of the City Hospital, the Ferris-wheel of an amusement park, and on clear days the oceanic waves of roof. Below, within the store, that view is entirely obliterated by a brace of shelves built across the corresponding window and brilliantly stacked with ribbons of a score of colors and as many widths. A considerable flow of daylight thus diverted, The Convenience Merchandise Corner, even of early afternoon, fades out into half-discernible corners; a rear-wall display of overalls and striped denim coats crowded back into indefinitude, the haberdashery counter, with a giant gilt shirt-stud suspended above, hardly more outstanding.

Even the notions and dry-goods, flanking the right wall in stacks and bolts, merge into blur, the outline of a white-sateen and corseted woman's torso surmounting the topmost of the shelves with bold curvature.

With spring sunshine even hot against the steel

rails of Winchester Road, and awnings drawn against its inroads into the window display, Mrs. Shila Coblenz, routing gloom, reached up tiptoe across the haberdashery counter for the suspended chain of a cluster of bulbs, the red of exertion rising up the taut line of throat and lifted chin.

"A little light on the subject, Milt."

"Let me, Mrs. C."

Facing her from the outer side of the counter, Mr. Milton Bauer stretched also, his well-pressed, pin-checked coat crawling up.

All things swam out into the glow. The great suspended stud; the background of shelves and boxes; the scissors-like overalls against the wall; a clothesline of children's factory-made print frocks; a center-bin of women's untrimmed hats; a headless dummy beside the door, enveloped in a long-sleeved gingham apron.

Beneath the dome of the wooden stud, Mrs. Shila Coblenz, of not too fulsome but the hour-glass proportions of two decades ago, smiled, her black eyes, ever so quick to dart, receding slightly as the cheeks lifted.

"Two twenty-five, Milt, for those ribbed assorted sizes and reinforced heels. Leave or take. Bergdorff & Sloan will quote me the whole mill at that price."

With his chest across the counter and legs out violently behind, Mr. Bauer flung up a glance from his order-pad.

"Have a heart, Mrs. C. I'm getting two-forty for that stocking from every house in town. The factory can't turn out the orders fast enough at that

price. An up-to-date woman like you mustn't make a noise like before the war."

"Leave or take."

"You could shave an egg," he said.

"And rush up those printed lawns. There was two in this morning, sniffing around for spring dimities."

"Any more cotton goods? Next month, this time, you'll be paying an advance of four cents on percales."

"Stocked."

"Can't tempt you with them wash silks, Mrs. C.? Neatest little article on the market to-day."

"No demand. They finger it up, and then buy the cotton stuffs. Every time I forget my trade hacks rock instead of clips bonds for its spending-money I get stung."

"This here wash silk, Mrs. C., would—"

"Send me up a dress-pattern off this coral-pink sample for Selene."

"This here dark mulberry, Mrs. C., would suit you something immense."

"That 'll be about all."

He flopped shut his book, snapping a rubber band about it and inserting it in an inner coat pocket.

"You ought to stick to them dark, winy shades, Mrs. C. With your coloring and black hair and eyes, they bring you out like a gipsy. Never seen you look better than at the Y. M. H. A. entertainment."

Quick color flowed down her open throat and into her shirtwaist. It was as if the platitude merged with the very corpuscles of a blush that sank down into thirsty soil.

"You boys," she said, "come out here and throw in a jolly with every bill of goods. I'll take a good fat discount instead."

"Fact. Never seen you look better. When you got out on the floor in that stamp-your-foot kind of dance with old man Shulof, your hand on your hip and your head jerking it up, there wasn't a girl on the floor, your own daughter included, could touch you, and I'm giving it to you straight."

"That old thing! It's a Russian folk-dance my mother taught me the first year we were in this country. I was three years old then, and, when she got just crazy with homesickness, we used to dance it to each other evenings on the kitchen floor."

"Say, have you heard the news?"

"No."

"Guess."

"Can't."

"Hammerstein is bringing over the crowned heads of Europe for vaudeville."

Mrs. Coblenz moved back a step, her mouth falling open.

"Why, Milton Bauer, in the old country a man could be strung up for saying less than that!"

"That didn't get across. Try another. A Frenchman and his wife were traveling in Russia, and—"

"If—if you had an old mother like mine up-stairs, Milton, eating out her heart and her days and her weeks and her months over a husband's grave somewhere in Siberia and a son's grave somewhere in Kishinef, you wouldn't see the joke neither."

Mr. Bauer executed a self-administered pat sharply against the back of his hand.

"Keeper," he said, "put me in the brain ward. I—I'm sorry, Mrs. C., so help me! Didn't mean to. How is your mother, Mrs. C.? Seems to me, at the dance the other night, Selene said she was fine and dandy."

"Selene ain't the best judge of her poor old grandmother. It's hard for a young girl to have patience for old age sitting and chewing all day over the past. It's right pitiful the way her grandmother knows it, too, and makes herself talk English all the time to please the child and tries to perk up for her. Selene, thank God, 'ain't suffered, and can't sympathize!"

"What's ailing her, Mrs. C.? I kinda miss seeing the old lady sitting down here in the store."

"It's the last year or so, Milt. Just like all of a sudden a woman as active as mama always was, her health and—her mind kind of went off with a pop."

"Thu! Thu!"

"Doctor says with care she can live for years, but—but it seems terrible the way her—poor mind keeps skipping back. Past all these thirty years in America to—even weeks before I was born. The night they—took my father off to Siberia, with his bare feet in the snow—for distributing papers they found on him—papers that used the word '*svoboda*' —'freedom.' And the time, ten years later—they shot down my brother right in front of her for—the same reason. She keeps living it over—living it over till I—could die."

"Say, ain't that just a shame, though!"

"Living it, and living it, and living it! The night

with me, a heavy three-year-old, in her arms that she got us to the border, dragging a pack of linens with her! The night my father's feet were bleeding in the snow, when they took him! How with me a kid in the crib, my—my brother's face was crushed in—with a heel and a spur. All night, sometimes, she cries in her sleep—begging to go back to find the graves. All day she sits making raffia wreaths to take back—making wreaths—making wreaths!"

"Say, ain't that tough!"

"It's a godsend she's got the eyes to do it. It's wonderful the way she reads—in English, too. There ain't a daily she misses. Without them and the wreaths—I dunno—I just dunno. Is—is it any wonder, Milt, I—I can't see the joke?"

"My God, no!"

"I'll get her back, though."

"Why, you—she can't get back there, Mrs. C."

"There's a way. Nobody can tell me there's not. Before the war—before she got like this, seven hundred dollars would have done it for both of us—and it will again, after the war. She's got the bank-book, and every week that I can squeeze out above expenses, she sees the entry for herself. I'll get her back. There's a way lying around somewhere. God knows why she should eat out her heart to go back—but she wants it. God, how she wants it!"

"Poor old dame!"

"You boys guy me with my close-fisted buying these last two years. It's up to me, Milt, to squeeze this old shebang dry. There's not much more than

a living in it at best, and now, with Selene grown up and naturally wanting to have it like other girls, it ain't always easy to see my way clear. But I'll do it, if I got to trust the store for a year to a child like Selene. I'll get her back."

"You can call on me, Mrs. C., to keep my eye on things while you're gone."

"You boys are one crowd of true blues, all right. There ain't a city salesman comes out here I wouldn't trust to the limit."

"You just try me out."

"Why, just to show you how a woman don't know how many real friends she has got, why—even Mark Haas, of the Mound City Silk Company, a firm I don't do a hundred dollars' worth of business with a year, I wish you could have heard him the other night at the Y. M. H. A., a man you know for yourself just goes there to be sociable with the trade."

"Fine fellow, Mark Haas!"

"'When the time comes, Mrs. Coblenz,' he says, 'that you want to make that trip, just you let me know. Before the war there wasn't a year I didn't cross the water twice, maybe three times, for the firm. I don't know there's much I can do; it ain't so easy to arrange for Russia, but, just the same, you let me know when you're ready to make that trip.' Just like that he said it. That from Mark Haas!"

"And a man like Haas don't talk that way if he don't mean it."

"Mind you, not a hundred dollars a year business with him. I haven't got the demands for silks."

"That wash silk I'm telling you about, though, Mrs. C., does up like a—"

"There's ma thumping with the poker on the up-stairs floor. When it's closing-time she begins to get restless. I—I wish Selene would come in. She went out with Lester Goldmark in his little flivver, and I get nervous about automobiles."

Mr. Bauer slid an open-face watch from his waist-coat.

"Good Lord! five-forty, and I've just got time to sell the Maplehurst Emporium a bill of goods!"

"Good-night, Milt; and mind you put up that order of assorted neckwear yourself. Greens in ready-tieds are good sellers for this time of the year, and put in some reds and purples for the teamsters."

"No sooner said than done."

"And come out for supper some Sunday night, Milt. It does mama good to have young people around."

"I'm yours."

"Good-night, Milt."

He reached across the counter, placing his hand over hers.

"Good-night, Mrs. C.," he said, a note lower in his throat; "and remember that call-on-me stuff wasn't all conversation."

"Good-night, Milt," said Mrs. Coblenz, a coating of husk over her own voice and sliding her hand out from beneath, to top his. "You—you're all right!"

Up-stairs, in a too tufted and too crowded room directly over the frontal half of the store, the window

overlooking the remote sea of city was turning taupe, the dusk of early spring, which is faintly tinged with violet, invading. Beside the stove, a base-burner with faint fire showing through its mica, the identity of her figure merged with the fat upholstery of the chair, except where the faint pink through the mica lighted up old flesh, Mrs. Miriam Horowitz, full of years and senile with them, wove with grasses, the écru of her own skin, wreaths that had mounted to a great stack in a bedroom cupboard.

A clock, with a little wheeze and burring attached to each chime, rang six, and upon it Mrs. Coblenz, breathing from a climb, opened the door.

"Ma, why didn't you rap for Katie to come up and light the gas? You'll ruin your eyes, dearie."

She found out a match, immediately lighting two jets of a center-chandelier, turning them down from singing, drawing the shades of the two front and the southeast windows, stooping over the upholstered chair to imprint a light kiss.

"A fine day, mama. There'll be an entry this week. Thirty dollars and thirteen cents and another call for garden implements. I think I'll lay in a hardware line after we—we get back. I can use the lower shelf of the china-table, eh, ma?"

Mrs. Horowitz, whose face, the color of old linen in the yellowing, emerged rather startling from the still black hair strained back from it, lay back in her chair, turning her profile against the upholstered back, half a wreath and a trail of raffia sliding to the floor. Age had sapped from beneath the skin, so that every curve had collapsed to bagginess, the cheeks and the underchin sagging with too much

skin. Even the hands were crinkled like too large gloves, a wide, curiously etched marriage band hanging loosely from the third finger.

Mrs. Coblenz stooped, recovering the wreath.

"Say, mama, this one is a beauty! That's a new weave, ain't it? Here, work some more, dearie—till Selene comes with your evening papers."

With her profile still to the chair-back, a tear oozed down the corrugated face of Mrs. Horowitz's cheek. Another.

"Now, mama! Now, mama!"

"I got a heaviness—here—inside. I got a heaviness—"

Mrs. Coblenz slid down to her knees beside the chair.

"Now, mama; shame on my little mama! Is that the way to act when Shila comes up after a good day? 'Ain't we got just lots to be thankful for—the business growing and the bank-book growing, and our Selene on top? Shame on mama!"

"I got a heaviness—here—inside—here."

Mrs. Coblenz reached up for the old hand, patting it.

"It's nothing, mama—a little nervousness."

"I'm an old woman. I—"

"And just think, Shila's mama, Mark Haas is going to get us letters and passports and—"

"My son—my boy—his father before him—"

"Mama—mama, please don't let a spell come on! It's all right. Shila's going to fix it. Any day now, maybe—"

"You'm a good girl. You'm a good girl, Shila."

Tears were coursing down to a mouth that was constantly wry with the taste of them.

"And you're a good mother, mama. Nobody knows better than me how good."

"You'm a good girl, Shila."

"I was thinking last night, mama, waiting up for Selene—just thinking how all the good you've done ought to keep your mind off the spells, dearie."

"My son—"

"Why, a woman with as much good to remember as you've got oughtn't to have time for spells. I got to thinking about Coblenz, mama, how—you never did want him, and when I—I went and did it, anyway, and made my mistake, you stood by me to—to the day he died. Never throwing anything up to me! Never nothing but my good little mother, working her hands to the bone after he got us out here to help meet the debts he left us. Ain't that a satisfaction for you to be able to sit and think, mama, how you helped—"

"His feet—blood from my heart in the snow—blood from my heart!"

"The past is gone, darling. What's the use tearing yourself to pieces with it? Them years in New York when it was a fight even for bread, and them years here trying to raise Selene and get the business on a footing, you didn't have time to brood then, mama. That's why, dearie, if only you'll keep yourself busy with something—the wreaths—the—"

"His feet—blood from my—"

"But I'm going to take you back, mama. To papa's grave. To Aylorff's. But don't eat your heart out until it comes, darling. I'm going to take

you back, mama, with every wreath in the stack; only, you mustn't eat out your heart in spells. You mustn't, mama; you mustn't."

Sobs rumbled up through Mrs. Horowitz, which her hand to her mouth tried to constrict.

"For his people he died. The papers—I begged he should burn them—he couldn't—I begged he should keep in his hate—he couldn't—in the square he talked it—the soldiers—he died for his people—they got him—the soldiers—his feet in the snow when they took him—the blood in the snow—O my God!—my—God!"

"Mama darling, please don't go over it all again. What's the use making yourself sick? Please!"

She was well forward in her chair now, winding her dry hands one over the other with a small rotary motion.

"I was rocking—Shila-baby in my lap—stirring on the fire black lentils for my boy—black lentils—he—"

"Mama!"

"My boy. Like his father before him. My—"

"Mama, please! Selene is coming any minute now. You know how she hates it. Don't let yourself think back, mama. A little will-power, the doctor says, is all you need. Think of to-morrow, mama; maybe, if you want, you can come down and sit in the store awhile and—"

"I was rocking. O my God! I was rocking, and—"

"Don't get to it—mama, please! Don't rock yourself that way! You'll get yourself dizzy! Don't, ma; don't!"

"Outside—my boy—the holler— O God! in my ears all my life! My boy—the papers—the swords —Aylorff—Aylorff—"

"'Shh-h-h—mama—"

"It came through his heart out the back—a blade with two sides—out the back when I opened the door; the spur in his face when he fell, Shila—the spur in his face—the beautiful face of my boy—my Aylorff—my husband before him—that died to make free!" And fell back, bathed in the sweat of the terrific hiccoughing of sobs.

"Mama, mama! My God! What shall we do? These spells! You'll kill yourself, darling. I'm going to take you back, dearie—ain't that enough? I promise. I promise. You mustn't, mama! These spells—they ain't good for a young girl like Selene to hear. Mama, 'ain't you got your own Shila—your own Selene? Ain't that something? Ain't it? Ain't it?"

Large drops of sweat had come out and a state of exhaustion that swept completely over, prostrating the huddled form in the chair.

"Bed—my bed!"

With her arms twined about the immediately supporting form of her daughter, her entire weight relaxed, and footsteps that dragged without lift, one after the other, Mrs. Horowitz groped out, one hand feeling in advance, into the gloom of a room adjoining.

"Rest! O my God! rest!"

"Yes, yes, mama; lean on me."

"My—bed."

"Yes, yes, darling."

"Bed."

Her voice had died now to a whimper that lay on the room after she had passed out of it.

When Selene Coblenz, with a gust that swept the room, sucking the lace curtains back against the panes, flung open the door upon that chromatic scene, the two jets of gas were singing softly into its silence, and within the nickel-trimmed base-burner the pink mica had cooled to gray. Sweeping open that door, she closed it softly, standing for the moment against it, her hand crossed in back and on the knob. It was as if—standing there with her head cocked and beneath a shadowy blue sailor-hat, a smile coming out—something within her was playing, sweetly insistent to be heard. Philomela, at the first sound of her nightingale self, must have stood thus, trembling with melody. Opposite her, above the crowded mantelpiece and surmounted by a raffia wreath, the enlarged-crayon gaze of her deceased maternal grandfather, abetted by a horrible device of photography, followed her, his eyes focusing the entire room at a glance. Impervious to that scrutiny, Miss Coblenz moved a tiptoe step or two farther into the room, lifting off her hat, staring and smiling through a three-shelved cabinet of knick-knacks at what she saw far and beyond. Beneath the two jets, high lights in her hair came out, bronze showing through the brown waves and the patches of curls brought out over her cheeks.

In her dark-blue dress, with the row of silver buttons down what was hip before the hipless age, the chest sufficiently concave and the silhouette a mere stroke of a hard pencil, Miss Selene Coblenz meas-

ured up and down to America's Venus de Milo, whose chief curvature is of the spine. Slim-etched, and that slimness enhanced by a conscious kind of collapse beneath the blue-silk girdle that reached up half-way to her throat, hers were those proportions which strong women, eschewing the sweetmeat, would earn by the sweat of the Turkish bath.

When Miss Coblenz caught her eye in the square of mirror above the mantelpiece, her hands flew to her cheeks to feel of their redness. They were soft cheeks, smooth with the pollen of youth, and hands still casing them, she moved another step toward the portièred door.

"Mama!"

Mrs. Coblenz emerged immediately, finger up for silence, kissing her daughter on the little spray of cheek-curls.

"'Shh-h-h! Gramaw just had a terrible spell."

She dropped down into the upholstered chair beside the base-burner, the pink and moisture of exertion out in her face, took to fanning herself with the end of a face-towel flung across her arm.

"Poor gramaw!" she said. "Poor gramaw!"

Miss Coblenz sat down on the edge of a slim, home-gilded chair, and took to gathering the blue-silk dress into little plaits at her knee.

"Of course, if you don't want to know where I've been—or anything—"

Mrs. Coblenz jerked herself to the moment.

"Did mama's girl have a good time? Look at your dress, all dusty! You oughtn't to wear your best in that little flivver."

Suddenly Miss Coblenz raised her glance, her red mouth bunched, her eyes all iris.

"Of course—if you don't want to know—anything."

At that large, brilliant gaze, Mrs. Coblenz leaned forward, quickened.

"Why, Selene!"

"Well, why—why don't you ask me something?"

"Why, I—I dunno, honey. Did—did you and Lester have a nice ride?"

There hung a slight pause, and then a swift moving and crumpling-up of Miss Coblenz on the floor beside her mother's knee.

"You know—only, you won't ask."

With her hand light upon her daughter's hair, Mrs. Coblenz leaned forward, her bosom rising to faster breathing.

"Why—Selene—I— Why—"

"We—we were speeding along, and—all of a sudden, out of a clear sky, he—he popped. He wants it in June, so we can make it our honeymoon to his new territory out in Oklahoma. He knew he was going to pop, he said, ever since that first night he saw me at the Y. M. H. A. He says to his uncle Mark, the very next day in the store, he says to him, 'Uncle Mark,' he says, 'I've met *the* little girl.' He says he thinks more of my little finger than all of his regular crowd of girls in town put together. He wants to live in one of the built-in-bed flats on Wasserman Avenue, like all the swell young marrieds. He's making twenty-six hundred now, mama, and if he makes good in the new Oklahoma territory, his Uncle Mark is—is going to take care

of him better. Ain't it like a dream, mama—your little Selene all of a sudden in with—the somebodies?"

Immediate tears were already finding staggering procession down Mrs. Coblenz's face, her hovering arms completely encircling the slight figure at her feet.

"My little girl! My little Selene! My all!"

"I'll be marrying into one of the best families in town, ma. A girl who marries a nephew of Mark Haas can hold up her head with the best of them. There's not a boy in town with a better future than Lester. Like Lester says, everything his Uncle Mark touches turns to gold, and he's already touched Lester. One of the best known men on Washington Avenue for his blood-uncle, and on his poor dead father's side related to the Katz & Harberger Harbergers. Was I right, mama, when I said if you'd only let me stop school I'd show you? Was I right, momsie?"

"My baby! It's like I can't realize it. So young!"

"He took the measure of my finger, mama, with a piece of string. A diamond, he says, not too flashy, but neat."

"We have 'em, and we suffer for 'em, and we lose 'em."

"He's going to trade in the flivver for a chummy roadster, and—"

"Oh, darling, it's like I can't bear it!"

At that Miss Coblenz sat back on her tall wooden heels, mauve spats crinkling.

"Well, you're a merry little future mother-in-law, momsie!"

"It ain't that, baby. I'm happy that my girl has got herself up in the world with a fine upright boy like Lester; only—you can't understand, babe, till you've got something of your own flesh and blood that belongs to you, that I—I couldn't feel anything except that a piece of my heart was going if—if it was a king you was marrying."

"Now, momsie, it's not like I was moving a thousand miles away. You can be glad I don't have to go far, to New York or to Cleveland, like Alma Yawitz."

"I am! I am!"

"Uncle—Uncle Mark, I guess, will furnish us up like he did Leon and Irma—only, I don't want mahogany; I want Circassian walnut. He gave them their flat-silver, too, Puritan design, for an engagement present. Think of it, mama, me having that stuck-up Irma Sinsheimer for a relation! It always made her sore when I got chums with Amy at school and got my nose in it with the Acme crowd, and—and she'll change her tune now, I guess, me marrying her husband's second cousin."

"Didn't Lester want to—to come in for a while, Selene, to—to see—me?"

Sitting there on her heels, Miss Coblenz looked away, answering with her face in profile.

"Yes; only—I—well, if you want to know it, mama, it's no fun for a girl to bring a boy like Lester up here in—in this crazy room, all hung up with gramaw's wreaths and half the time her sitting out there in the dark, looking in at us through the door and talking to herself."

"Gramaw's an old—"

"Is—it any wonder I'm down at Amy's half the time? How—do you think a girl feels to have gramaw keep hanging onto that old black wig of hers and not letting me take the crayons or wreaths down off the wall? In Lester's crowd they don't know—nothing about revolutionary stuff and—and persecutions. Amy's grandmother don't even talk with an accent, and Lester says his grandmother came from Alsace-Lorraine. That's French. They think only tailors and old-clothes men and—"

"Selene!"

"Well, they do. You—you're all right, mama, as up to date as any of them, but how do you think a girl feels, with gramaw always harping right in front of everybody the—the way granpa was a revolutionist and was—was hustled off barefooted to Siberia like—like a tramp? And the way she was cooking black beans when—my uncle—died. Other girls' grandmothers don't tell everything they know. Alma Yawitz's grandmother wears lorgnettes, and you told me yourself they came from nearly the same part of the Pale as gramaw. But you don't hear them remembering it. Alma Yawitz says she's Alsace-Lorraine on both sides. People don't—tell everything they know. Anyway—where a girl's got herself as far as I have!"

Through sobs that rocked her, Mrs. Coblenz looked down upon her daughter.

"Your poor old grandmother don't deserve that from you! In her day she worked her hands to the bone for you. With—the kind of father you had we—we might have died in the gutter but—for how she helped to keep us out, you ungrateful

girl—your poor old grandmother, that's suffered so terrible!"

"I know it, mama, but so have other people suffered."

"She's old, Selene—old."

"I tell you it's the way you indulge her, mama. I've seen her sitting here as perk as you please, and the minute you come in the room down goes her head like—like she was dying."

"It's her mind, Selene—that's going. That's why I feel if I could only get her back. She ain't old, gramaw ain't. If I could only get her back where she—could see for herself—the graves—is all she needs. All old people think of—the grave. It's eating her—eating her mind. Mark Haas is going to fix it for me after the war—maybe before—if he can. That's the only way poor gramaw can live—or die—happy, Selene. Now—now that my—my little girl ain't any longer my responsibility, I—I'm going to take her back—my little—girl"—her hand reached out, caressing the smooth head, her face projected forward and the eyes yearning down—"my all."

"It's you will be my responsibility now, ma."

"No! No!"

"The first thing Lester says was a flat on Wasserman and a spare room for Mother Coblenz when she wants to come down. Wasn't it sweet for him to put it that way right off, ma? 'Mother Coblenz,' he says."

"He's a good boy, Selene. It 'll be a proud day for me and gramaw. Gramaw mustn't miss none of it. He's a good boy and a fine family."

"That's why, mama, we—got to—to do it up right."

"Lester knows, child, he's not marrying a rich girl."

"A girl don't have to—be rich to get married right."

"You'll have as good as mama can afford to give it to her girl."

"It—it would be different if Lester's uncle and all wasn't in the Acme Club crowd, and if I hadn't got in with all that bunch. It's the last expense I'll ever be to you, mama."

"Oh, baby, don't say that!"

"I—me and Lester—Lester and me were talking, mama—when the engagement's announced next week—a reception—"

"We can clear out this room, move the bed out of gramaw's room into ours, and serve the ice-cream and cake in—"

"Oh, mama, I don't mean—that!"

"What?"

"Who ever heard of having a reception *here!* People won't come from town 'way out to this old—cabbage-patch. Even Gertie Wolf, with their big house on West Pine Boulevard, had her reception at the Walsingham Hotel. You— We—can't expect Mark Haas and all the relations—the Sinsheimers—and—all to come out here. I'd rather not have any."

"But, Selene, everybody knows we ain't millionaires, and that you got in with that crowd through being friends at school with Amy Rosen. All the city salesmen and the boys on Washington Avenue, even Mark Haas himself, that time he was in the

store with Lester, knows the way we live. You don't need to be ashamed of your little home, Selene, even if it ain't on West Pine Boulevard."

"It 'll be—your last expense, mama. The Walsingham, that's where the girl that Lester Goldmark marries is expected to have her reception."

"But, Selene, mama can't afford nothing like that."

Pink swam up into Miss Coblenz's face, and above the sheer-white collar there was a little beating movement at the throat, as if something were fluttering within.

"I—I'd just as soon not get married as—as not to have it like other girls."

"But, Selene—"

"If I—can't have a trousseau like other girls and the things that go with marrying into a—a family like Lester's—I—then—there's no use. I—I can't! I—wouldn't!"

She was fumbling, now, for a handkerchief, against tears that were imminent.

"Why, baby, a girl couldn't have a finer trousseau than the old linens back yet from Russia that me and gramaw got saved up for our girl—linen that can't be bought these days. Bed-sheets that gramaw herself carried to the border, and—"

"Oh, I know! I knew you'd try to dump that stuff on me. That old, worm-eaten stuff in gramaw's chest."

"It's hand-woven, Selene, with—"

"I wouldn't have that yellow old stuff—that old-fashioned junk—if I didn't have any trousseau. If I can't afford monogrammed up-to-date linens, like

even Alma Yawitz, and a—a pussy-willow-taffeta reception dress, I wouldn't have any. I wouldn't." Her voice, crowded with passion and tears, rose to the crest of a sob. "I—I'd die first!"

"Selene, Selene, mama 'ain't got the money. If she had it, wouldn't she be willing to take the very last penny to give her girl the kind of a wedding she wants? A trousseau like Alma's cost a thousand dollars, if it cost a cent. Her table-napkins alone, they say, cost thirty-six dollars a dozen, unmonogrammed. A reception at the Walsingham costs two hundred dollars, if it costs a cent. Selene, mama will make for you every sacrifice she can afford, but she 'ain't got the money!"

"You—have got the money!"

"So help me God, Selene! You know, with the quarries shut down, what business has been. You know how—sometimes even to make ends meet it is a pinch. You're an ungrateful girl, Selene, to ask what I ain't able to do for you. A child like you, that's been indulged, that I 'ain't even asked ever in her life to help a day down in the store. If I had the money, God knows you should be married in real lace, with the finest trousseau a girl ever had. But I 'ain't got the money—I 'ain't got the money."

"You have got the money! The book in gramaw's drawer is seven hundred and forty. I guess I ain't blind. I know a thing or two."

"Why, Selene! That's gramaw's—to go back—"

"You mean the bank-book's hers?"

"That's gramaw's, to go back—home on. That's the money for me to take gramaw and her wreaths back home on."

"There you go—talking luny."

"Selene!"

"Well, I'd like to know what else you'd call it, kidding yourself along like that."

"You—"

"All right. If you think gramaw, with her life all lived, comes first before me, with all my life to live—all right!"

"Your poor old—"

"It's always been gramaw first in this house, anyway. I couldn't even have company since I'm grown up because the way she's always allowed around. Nobody can say I ain't good to gramaw; Lester says it's beautiful the way I am with her, remembering always to bring the newspapers and all, but just the same, I know when right's right and wrong's wrong. If my life ain't more important than gramaw's, with hers all lived, all right. Go ahead!"

"Selene, Selene, ain't it coming to gramaw, after all her years' hard work helping us that—she should be entitled to go back with her wreaths for the graves? Ain't she entitled to die with that off her poor old mind? You bad, ungrateful girl, you, it's coming to a poor old woman that's suffered as terrible as gramaw that I should find a way to take her back."

"Take her back. Where—to jail? To prison in Siberia herself—"

"There's a way—"

"You know gramaw's too old to take a trip like that. You know in your own heart she won't ever see that day. Even before the war, much less now, there wasn't a chance for her to get passports back

there. I don't say it ain't all right to kid her along, but when it comes to—to keeping me out of the—the biggest thing that can happen to a girl—when gramaw wouldn't know the difference if you keep showing her the bank-book—it ain't right. That's what it ain't. It ain't right!"

In the smallest possible compass, Miss Coblenz crouched now upon the floor, head down somewhere in her knees, and her curving back racked with rising sobs.

"Selene—but some day—"

"Some day nothing! A woman like gramaw can't do much more than go down-town once a year, and then you talk about taking her to Russia! You can't get in there, I—tell you—no way you try to fix it after—the way gramaw—had—to leave. Even before the war Ray Letsky's father couldn't get back on business. There's nothing for her there, even after she gets there. In thirty years, do you think you can find those graves? Do you know the size of Siberia? No! But I got to pay—I got to pay for gramaw's nonsense. But I won't. I won't go to Lester if I can't go right. I—"

"Baby, don't cry so—for God's sake, don't cry so!"

"I wish I was dead!"

"'Sh-h-h! You'll wake gramaw."

"I do!"

"O God, help me to do the right thing!"

"If gramaw could understand, she'd be the first one to tell you the right thing. Anybody would."

"No! No! That little bank-book and its entries are her life—her life."

"She don't need to know, mama. I'm not ask-

ing that. That's the way they always do with old people to keep them satisfied. Just humor 'em. Ain't I the one with life before me—ain't I, mama?"

"O God, show me the way!"

"If there was a chance, you think I'd be spoiling things for gramaw? But there ain't, mama—not one."

"I keep hoping if not before, then after the war. With the help of Mark Haas—"

"With the book in her drawer, like always, and the entries changed once in a while, she'll never know the difference. I swear to God she'll never know the difference, mama!"

"Poor gramaw!"

"Mama, promise me—your little Selene. Promise me?"

"Selene, Selene, can we keep it from her?"

"I swear we can, mama."

"Poor, poor gramaw!"

"Mama? Mama darling?"

"O God, show me the way!"

"Ain't it me that's got life before me? My whole life?"

"Yes—Selene."

"Then, mama, please—you will—you will—darling?"

"Yes, Selene."

In a large, all-frescoed, seventy-five-dollar-an-evening-with-lights and cloak-room-service ballroom of the Hotel Walsingham, a family hostelry in that family circle of St. Louis known as its West End, the city holds not a few of its charity-whists and

benefit musicales; on a dais which can be carried in for the purpose, morning readings of "Little Moments from Little Plays," and with the introduction of a throne-chair, the monthly lodge-meetings of the Lady Mahadharatas of America. For weddings and receptions, a lane of red carpet leads up to the slight dais; and lined about the brocade and paneled walls, gilt-and-brocade chairs, with the crest of Walsingham in padded embroidery on the backs. Crystal chandeliers, icicles of dripping light, glow down upon a scene of parquet floor, draped velours, and mirrors wreathed in gilt.

At Miss Selene Coblenz's engagement reception, an event properly festooned with smilax and properly jostled with the elbowing figures of waiters tilting their plates of dark-meat chicken salad, two olives, and a finger-roll in among the crowd, a stringed three-piece orchestra, faintly seen and still more faintly heard, played into the babel.

Light, glitteringly filtered through the glass prisms, flowed down upon the dais; upon Miss Selene Coblenz, in a taffeta that wrapped her flat waist and chest like a calyx and suddenly bloomed into the full-inverted petals of a skirt; upon Mr. Lester Goldmark, his long body barely knitted yet to man's estate, and his complexion almost clear, standing omnivorous, omnipotent, omnipresent, his hair so well brushed that it lay like black japanning, a white carnation at his silk lapel, and his smile slightly projected by a rush of very white teeth to the very front. Next in line, Mrs. Coblenz, the red of a fervent moment high in her face, beneath the maroon-net bodice the swell of her bosom, fast, and her white-

gloved hand constantly at the opening and shutting of a lace-and-spangled fan. Back, and well out of the picture, a potted hydrangea beside the Louis Quinze armchair, her hands in silk mitts laid out along the gold-chair sides, her head quavering in a kind of mild palsy, Mrs. Miriam Horowitz, smiling and quivering her state of bewilderment.

With an unfailing propensity to lay hold of to whomsoever he spake, Mr. Lester Goldmark placed his white-gloved hand upon the white-gloved arm of Mrs. Coblenz.

"Say, Mother Coblenz, ain't it about time this little girl of mine was resting her pink-satin double A's? She's been on duty up here from four to seven. No wonder Uncle Mark bucked."

Mrs. Coblenz threw her glance out over the crowded room, surging with a wave of plumes and clipped heads like a swaying bucket of water which crowds but does not lap over its sides.

"I guess the crowd is finished coming in by now. You tired, Selene?"

Miss Coblenz turned her glowing glance.

"Tired! This is the swellest engagement-party I ever had."

Mrs. Coblenz shifted her weight from one slipper to the other, her maroon-net skirts lying in a swirl around them.

"Just look at gramaw, too! She holds up her head with the best of them. I wouldn't have had her miss this, not for the world."

"Sure one fine old lady! Ought to have seen her shake my hand, Mother Coblenz. I nearly had to holler, 'Ouch!'"

"Mama, here comes Sara Suss and her mother. Take my arm, Lester honey. People mama used to know." Miss Coblenz leaned forward beyond the dais with the frail curve of a reed.

"Howdado, Mrs. Suss. . . . Thank you. Thanks. Howdado, Sara? Meet my *fiancé*, Lester Haas Goldmark; Mrs. Suss and Sara Suss, my *fiancé*. . . . That's right, better late than never. There's plenty left. . . . We think he is, Mrs. Suss. Aw, Lester honey, quit! Mama, here's Mrs. Suss and Sadie."

"Mrs. Suss! Say—if you hadn't come, I was going to lay it up against you. If my new ones can come on a day like this, it's a pity my old friends can't come, too. Well, Sadie, it's your turn next, eh? . . . I know better than that. With them pink cheeks and black eyes, I wish I had a dime for every chance." (*Sotto.*) "Do you like it, Mrs. Suss? Pussy-willow taffeta. . . . Say, it ought to be. An estimate dress from Madame Murphy—sixty-five with findings. I'm so mad, Sara, you and your mama couldn't come to the house that night to see her things. If I say so myself, Mrs. Suss, everybody who seen it says Jacob Sinsheimer's daughter herself didn't have a finer. Maybe not so much, but every stitch, Mrs. Suss, made by the same sisters in the same convent that made hers. . . . Towels! I tell her it's a shame to expose them to the light, much less wipe on them. Ain't it? . . . The goodness looks out from his face. And such a love-pair! Lunatics, I call them. He can't keep his hands off. It ain't nice, I tell him. . . . Me? Come close. I dyed the net myself. Ten cents' worth of maroon color. Don't it warm your heart, Mrs. Suss? This

morning, after we got her in Lester's Uncle Mark's big automobile, I says to her, I says, 'Mama, you sure it ain't too much?' Like her old self for a minute, Mrs. Suss, she hit me on the arm. 'Go 'way,' she said; 'on my grandchild's engagement day anything should be too much?' Here, waiter, get these two ladies some salad. Good measure, too. Over there by the window, Mrs. Suss. Help yourselves."

"Mama, 'sh-h-h! the waiters know what to do."

Mrs. Coblenz turned back, the flush warm to her face.

"Say, for an old friend I can be my own self."

"Can we break the receiving-line now, Lester honey, and go down with everybody? The Sinsheimers and their crowd over there by themselves, we ought to show we appreciate their coming."

Mr. Goldmark twisted high in his collar, cupping her small bare elbow in his hand.

"That's what I say, lovey; let's break. Come, Mother Coblenz, let's step down on high society's corns."

"Lester!"

"You and Selene go down with the crowd, Lester. I want to take gramaw to rest for a while before we go home. The manager says we can have room fifty-six by the elevator for her to rest in."

"Get her some newspapers, ma, and I brought her a wreath down to keep her quiet. It's wrapped in her shawl."

Her skirts delicately lifted, Miss Coblenz stepped down off the dais. With her cloud of gauze-scarf enveloping her, she was like a tulle-clouded "Springtime," done in the key of Botticelli.

"Oop-si-lah, lovey-dovey!" said Mr. Goldmark, tilting her elbow for the downward step.

"Oop-si-lay, dovey-lovey!" said Miss Coblenz, relaxing to the support.

Gathering up her plentiful skirts, Mrs. Coblenz stepped off, too, but back toward the secluded chair beside the potted hydrangea. A fine line of pain, like a cord tightening, was binding her head, and she put up two fingers to each temple, pressing down the throb.

"Mrs. Coblenz, see what I got for you!" She turned, smiling. "You don't look like you need salad and green ice-cream. You look like you needed what I wanted—a cup of coffee."

"Aw, Mr. Haas—now where in the world— Aw, Mr. Haas!"

With a steaming cup outheld and carefully out of collision with the crowd, Mr. Haas unflapped a napkin with his free hand, inserting his foot in the rung of a chair and dragging it toward her.

"Now," he cried, "sit and watch me take care of you!"

There comes a tide in the affairs of men when the years lap softly, leaving no particular inundations on the celebrated sands of time. Between forty and fifty, that span of years which begin the first slight gradations from the apex of life, the gray hair, upstanding like a thick-bristled brush off Mr. Haas's brow, had not so much as whitened, or the slight paunchiness enhanced even the moving-over of a button. When Mr. Haas smiled, his mustache, which ended in a slight but not waxed flourish, lifted to reveal a white-and-gold smile of the artistry of

careful dentistry, and when, upon occasion, he threw back his head to laugh, the roof of his mouth was his own.

He smiled now, peering through gold-rimmed spectacles attached by a chain to a wire-encircled left ear.

"Sit," he cried, "and let me serve you!"

Standing there with a diffidence which she could not crowd down, Mrs. Coblenz smiled through closed lips that would pull at the corners.

"The idea, Mr. Haas—going to all that trouble!"

"'Trouble'! she says. After two hours' handshaking in a swallow-tail, a man knows what real trouble is!"

She stirred around and around the cup, supping up spoonfuls gratefully.

"I'm sure much obliged. It touches the right spot."

He pressed her down to the chair, seating himself on the low edge of the dais.

"Now you sit right there and rest your bones."

"But my mother, Mr. Haas. Before it's time for the ride home she must rest in a quiet place."

"My car 'll be here and waiting five minutes after I telephone."

"You—sure have been grand, Mr. Haas!"

"I shouldn't be grand yet to my— Let's see—what relation is it I am to you?"

"Honest, you're a case, Mr. Haas—always making fun!"

"My poor dead sister's son marries your daughter. That makes you my—nothing-in-law."

"Honest, Mr. Haas, if I was around you, I'd get fat laughing."

"I wish you was."

"Selene would have fits. 'Never get fat, mama,' she says, 'if you don't want—'"

"I don't mean that."

"What?"

"I mean I wish you was around me."

She struck him then with her fan, but the color rose up into the mound of her carefully piled hair.

"I always say I can see where Lester gets his comical ways. Like his uncle, that boy keeps us all laughing."

"Gad! look at her blush! I know women your age would give fifty dollars a blush to do it that way."

She was looking away again, shoulders heaving to silent laughter, the blush still stinging.

"It's been so—so long, Mr. Haas, since I had compliments made to me. You make me feel so—silly."

"I know it, you nice, fine woman, you; and it's a darn shame!"

"Mr.—Haas!"

"I mean it. I hate to see a fine woman not get her dues. Anyways, when she's the finest woman of them all!"

"I—the woman that lives to see a day like this—her daughter the happiest girl in the world, with the finest boy in the world—is getting her dues, all right, Mr. Haas."

"She's a fine girl, but she ain't worth her mother's little finger-nail."

"Mr.—Haas!"

"No, sir-ree!"

"I must be going now, Mr. Haas. My mother—"

"That's right. The minute a man tries to break

the ice with this little lady, it's a freeze-out. Now what did I say so bad? In business, too. Never seen the like. It's like trying to swat a fly to come down on you at the right minute. But now, with you for a nothing-in-law, I got rights."

"If—you ain't the limit, Mr. Haas!"

"Don't mind saying it, Mrs. C., and, for a bachelor, they tell me I'm not the worst judge in the world, but there's not a woman on the floor stacks up like you do."

"Well—of all things!"

"Mean it."

"My mother, Mr. Haas, she—"

"And if anybody should ask you if I've got you on my mind or not, well, I've already got the letters out on that little matter of the passports you spoke to me about. If there's a way to fix that up for you, and leave it to me to find it, I—"

She sprang now, trembling, to her feet, all the red of the moment receding.

"Mr. Haas, I—I must go now. My—mother—"

He took her arm, winding her in and out among crowded-out chairs behind the dais.

"I wish it to every mother to have a daughter like you, Mrs. C."

"No! No!" she said, stumbling rather wildly through the chairs. "No! No! No!"

He forged ahead, clearing her path of them.

Beside the potted hydrangea, well back and yet within an easy view, Mrs. Horowitz, her gilt armchair well cushioned for the occasion, and her black grenadine spread decently about her, looked out upon the scene, her slightly palsied head well forward.

"Mama, you got enough? You wouldn't have missed it, eh? A crowd of people we can be proud to entertain. Not? Come; sit quiet in another room for a while, and then Mr. Haas, with his nice big car, will drive us all home again. You know Mr. Haas, dearie—Lester's uncle that had us drove so careful in his fine car. You remember, dearie—Lester's uncle?"

Mrs. Horowitz looked up, her old face crackling to smile.

"My grandchild! My grandchild! She'm a fine one. Not? My grandchild! My grandchild!"

"You—mustn't mind, Mr. Haas. That's—the way she's done since—since she's—sick. Keeps repeating—"

"My grandchild! From a good mother and a bad father comes a good grandchild. My grandchild! She'm a good one. My—"

"Mama dearie, Mr. Haas is in a hurry. He's come to help me walk you into a little room to rest before we go home in Mr. Haas's big, fine auto. Where you can go and rest, mama, and read the newspapers. Come."

"My back—*ach*—my back!"

"Yes, yes, mama; we'll fix it. Up! So—la!"

They raised her by the crook of each arm, gently.

"So! Please, Mr. Haas, the pillows. Shawl. There!"

Around a rear hallway, they were almost immediately into a blank, staring hotel bedroom, fresh towels on the furniture-tops only enhancing its staleness.

"Here we are. Sit her here, Mr. Haas, in this rocker."

They lowered her, almost inch by inch, sliding down pillows, against the chair-back.

"Now, Shila's little mama want to sleep?"

"I got—no rest—no rest."

"You're too excited, honey; that's all."

"No rest."

"Here—here's a brand-new hotel Bible on the table, dearie. Shall Shila read it to you?"

"Aylorff—"

"Now, now, mama. Now, now; you mustn't! Didn't you promise Shila? Look! See, here's a wreath wrapped in your shawl for Shila's little mama to work on. Plenty of wreaths for us to take back. Work awhile, dearie, and then we'll get Selene and Lester, and, after all the nice company goes away, we'll go home in the auto."

"I begged he should keep in his hate—his feet in the—"

"I know! The papers! That's what little mama wants. Mr. Haas, that's what she likes better than anything—the evening papers."

"I'll go down and send 'em right up with a boy, and telephone for the car. The crowd's beginning to pour out now. Just hold your horses there, Mrs. C.. and I'll have those papers up here in a jiffy."

He was already closing the door after him, letting in and shutting out a flare of music.

"See, mama, nice Mr. Haas is getting us the papers. Nice evening papers for Shila's mama." She leaned down into the recesses of the black grenadine, withdrawing from one of the pockets a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles, adjusting them with

some difficulty to the nodding head. "Shila's—little mama! Shila's mama!"

"Aylorff, the littlest wreath for—Aylorff— *Meine Kräntze*—"

"Yes, yes."

"*Mein Mann. Mein Sühn.*"

"'Shh-h-h, dearie!"

"Aylorff—*der klenste Kranz far ihm!*"

"'Shh-h-h, dearie! Talk English like Selene wants. Wait till we get on the ship—the beautiful ship to take us back. Mama, see out the window! Look! That's the beautiful Forest Park, and this is the fine Hotel Walsingham just across. See out! Selene is going to have a flat on—"

"*Sey hoben gestorben far Freiheit. Sey hoben*—"

"There! That's the papers!"

To a succession of quick knocks, she flew to the door, returning with the folded evening editions under her arm.

"Now," she cried, unfolding and inserting the first of them into the quivering hands—"now, a shawl over my little mama's knees and we're fixed!"

With a series of rapid movements she flung open one of the black-cashmere shawls across the bed, folding it back into a triangle. Beside the table, bare except for the formal, unthumbed Bible, Mrs. Horowitz rattled out a paper, her near-sighted eyes traveling back and forth across the page.

Music from the ferned-in orchestra came in drifts, faint, not so faint. From somewhere, then immediately from everywhere—beyond, below, without, the fast shouts of newsboys mingling.

Suddenly and of her own volition, and with a cry

that shot up through the room, rending it like a gash, Mrs. Horowitz, who moved by inches, sprang to her supreme height, her arms, the crooks forced out, flung up.

"My darlings—what died—for it! My darlings what died for it! My darlings—Aylorff, my husband!" There was a wail rose up off her words, like the smoke of incense curling, circling around her. "My darlings what died to make free!"

"Mama! Darling! Mama! Mr. Haas! Help! Mama! My God!"

"Aylorff—my husband— I paid with my blood to make free—my blood— My son—my—own—" Immovable there, her arms flung up and tears so heavy that they rolled whole from her face down to the black grenadine, she was as sonorous as the tragic meter of an Alexandrine line; she was like Ruth, ancestress of heroes and progenitor of kings.

"My boy—my own! They died for it! *Mein Mann! Mein Sühn!*"

On her knees, frantic to press her down once more into the chair, terrified at the rigid immobility of the upright figure, Mrs. Coblenz paused then, too, her clasp falling away, and leaned forward to the open sheet of the newspaper, its black head-lines facing her:

RUSSIA FREE

BANS DOWN 100,000 SIBERIAN PRISONERS LIBERATED

In her ears a ringing silence, as if a great steel disk had clattered down into the depths of her consciousness. There on her knees, trembling seized

her, and she hugged herself against it, leaning forward to corroborate her gaze.

MOST RIGID AUTOCRACY IN THE WORLD OVERTHROWN

RUSSIA REJOICES

"Mama! Mama! My God! Mama!"

"Home, Shila; home! My husband who died for it—Aylorff! Home now, quick! My wreaths! My wreaths!"

"O my God! Mama!"

"Home!"

"Yes, darling—yes—"

"My wreaths!"

"Yes, yes, darling; your wreaths. Let—let me think. Freedom! O my God! help me to find a way! O my God!"

"My wreaths!"

"Here, darling, here!"

From the floor beside her, the raffia wreath half in the making, Mrs. Coblenz reached up, pressing it flat to the heaving old bosom.

"There, darling, there!"

"I paid with my blood—"

"Yes, yes, mama; you—paid with your blood. Mama—sit, please. Sit and—let's try to think. Take it slow, darling; it's like we can't take it in all at once. I— We— Sit down, darling. You'll make yourself terrible sick. Sit down, darling; you—you're slipping."

"My wreaths—"

Heavily, the arm at the waist gently sustaining, Mrs. Horowitz sank rather softly down, her eyelids fluttering for the moment. A smile had come out

on her face, and, as her head sank back against the rest, the eyes resting at the downward flutter, she gave out a long breath, not taking it in again.

"Mama! You're fainting!" She leaned to her, shaking the relaxed figure by the elbows, her face almost touching the tallow-like one with the smile lying so deeply into it. "Mama! My God! darling, wake up! I'll take you back. I'll find a way to take you. I'm a bad girl, darling, but I'll find a way to take you. I'll take you if—if I kill for it! I promise before God I'll take you. To-morrow—now—nobody can keep me from taking you. The wreaths, mama! Get ready the wreaths! Mama darling, wake up! Get ready the wreaths! The wreaths!" Shaking at that quiet form, sobs that were full of voice tearing raw from her throat, she fell to kissing the sunken face, enclosing it, stroking it, holding her streaming gaze closely and burningly against the closed lids. "Mama, I swear to God I'll take you! Answer me, mama! The bank-book—you've got it! Why don't you wake up, mama? Help!"

Upon that scene, the quiet of the room so raucously lacerated, burst Mr. Haas, too breathless for voice.

"Mr. Haas—my mother! Help—my mother! It's a faint, ain't it? A faint?"

He was beside her at two bounds, feeling of the limp wrists, laying his ear to the grenadine bosom, lifting the reluctant lids, touching the flesh that yielded so to touch.

"It's a faint, ain't it, Mr. Haas? Tell her I'll take her back. Wake her up, Mr. Haas! Tell her

I'm a bad girl, but I—I'm going to take her back. Now! Tell her! Tell her, Mr. Haas, I've got the bank-book. Please! Please! O my God!"

He turned to her, his face working to keep down compassion.

"We must get a doctor, little lady."

She threw out an arm.

"No! No! I see! My old mother—my old mother—all her life a nobody— She helped—she gave it to them—my mother—a poor little widow nobody— She bought with her blood that freedom —she—"

"God! I just heard it down-stairs—it's the tenth wonder of the world. It's too big to take in. I was afraid—"

"Mama darling, I tell you, wake up! I'm a bad girl, but I'll take you back. Tell her, Mr. Haas, I'll take her back. Wake up, darling! I swear to God I'll take you!"

"Mrs. Coblenz, my—poor little lady, your mother don't need you to take her back. She's gone back where—where she wants to be. Look at her face, little lady. Can't you see she's gone back?"

"No! No! Let me go. Let me touch her. No! No! Mama darling!"

"Why, there wasn't a way, little lady, you could have fixed it for that poor—old body. She's beyond any of the poor fixings we could do for her. You never saw her face like that before. Look!"

"The wreaths—the wreaths!"

He picked up the raffia circle, placing it back again against the quiet bosom.

"Poor little lady!" he said. "Shila—that's left

for us to do. You and me, Shila—we'll take the wreaths back for her."

"My darling—my darling mother! I'll take them back for you! I'll take them back for you!"

"*We'll* take them back for her—Shila."

"I'll—"

"*We'll* take them back for her—Shila."

"*We'll* take them back for you, mama. We'll take them back for you, darling!"

THE END

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